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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY, 1974
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NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

MURDER IN MY FAMILY

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Ellen Barker had tried every means possible to locate her sister, but neither the private detectives she hired nor all her husband's money had been able to accomplish the job. But then it became very urgent that Ellen find the missing woman. For Mike Shayne it was to be a double task: find Ellen's sister, and keep her from killing Ellen before the day was out.

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MURDER IN MY FAMILY

For brave, doomed Ellen Barker there could be only one way back. Mike Shayne would have to make himself a living decoy—a decoy that one trigger blazing second could turn into death!

by Brett Halliday

THE LITTLE black and white spotted puppy dog didn't belong on Mrs. Ellen Barker's luxurious Miami Beach estate. He was strictly a runaway from the servants' quarters of another estate across the street and down the block. He was just a stray puppy following his very young nose in pursuit of new and nameless delights.

He didn't even see the car as he ran out of the flower bed to cross the winding drive.

Ellen Barker saw the puppy though.

She tramped her foot down as hard as she could on the brake pedal of her very expensive foreign runabout. The brake started to catch and then there was a snapping sound

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from under the car and all of a sudden she didn't have any brakes at all.

The puppy was lucky enough not to be in the direct path of the wheels and small enough so the body of the car went right on over without even scratching him.

He gave one startled yelp and took off for home.

Ellen Barker would have yelped right along with the puppy if she hadn't been a very cool headed and intelligent woman. The car wasn't going too fast, as it was still in the winding drive. She put it into low gear and then into neutral and let it nose gently into a thick clump of ornamental shrubbery which acted in place of the missing brakes.

Then she got out of the car and walked back to the front door of her home. Once inside she took a good three fingers of brandy from the bottle under the bar in the Florida room of the big house, and then made a phone call.

The mechanic she called had done her work for years. He came up in his wrecking truck and got Ellen's car out of the shrubbery and jacked it up and went under for a look.

"You're right, Mrs. Barker," he said. "The brake line of your car was cut almost all the way through. If you'd tried to brake hard in traffic instead of in your own drive, there'd have been a real crackup. You might not be alive now."

"Thank you, Pete," she said. "Are you sure it couldn't have been an accidental break?"

"Just about as sure as I can be, Mrs. Barker," the mechanic said. "The marks of the file are still on the metal of the brake line." After a moment, he went on: "You want I should notify the police, Mrs. Barker?"

"No thank you, Pete," she said. "I'll take care of that myself. You tow the car back to your garage and put in a new brake line. If I have to go out I'll use one of the other cars."

When the man had gone, Mrs. Barker did take a station wagon from the garage and drove a few blocks to the nearest public corner phone booth.

She was suddenly afraid to use the gold princess phone on the table beside her bed. There were too many extensior phones in that big palace, too many servants, too many ears that might listen. The phone line could have been bugged outside the house.

Ellen Barker wanted this call to be quite private indeed.

The voice that answered the ringing phone belonged to an old and close good friend.

"Tim Rourke here," said the ace feature writer on the staff

of the *Miami News* from his office in the *News* tower across the bay.

"Thank God," she said. "Tim, this is Ellen Barker. I need your help. I think I need it in an awful hurry."

"Of course, Ellen. You know you can count on me." Tim Rourke's voice showed his concern. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"I think somebody's trying to kill me, Tim," Ellen said. "In fact I'm damned well sure somebody's trying to kill me. She tried again not an hour ago. I need help and I need protection, and I can't call the police."

"Why can't you call the police?" Tim Rourke asked her, "and why do you say 'she' tried? Do you know who it is?"

"I think I do," Ellen said. "It's my sister."

II

WITHIN THE hour Tim Rourke drove up to the door of the big house on Miami Beach. With him in his brand new sports car was his longtime friend, Mike Shayne.

"I don't really know what it's about," Rourke told his friend on the phone. "All I know is Ellen sounded scared and that's good enough for me. I've known her for years and she's got moxie and a level head. I think she really does need help, and you're the one to give it. I told her I'd try to get you to take the case, and she approved. Money's no object by the way. The Barker fortune is one of the biggest I know."

"So what's it all about?" Shayne had asked.

"I think I better let Ellen tell you that," Rourke had said. "I'll pick you up at your office in half an hour and drive you over to her place."

Ellen Barker opened the door of the big house when she saw Tim Rourke's car drive up. She was a striking figure of a woman in her mid forties with a

still splendid figure, beautifully coifed black hair and a graceful, vibrant air. Her eyes were black like her hair and her oval face had an aristocratic, almost regal beauty. She wore an expensive, but simple two-piece suit of pale blue linen which set off her beauty to perfection.

"Come right in Tim, and you too Mr. Shayne," she said. "I'm so glad you could come."

Inside in the hallway she took both of Tim Rourke's hands and looked up into his face.

"Thank you, Tim, I am awfully glad you got here so quickly. I guess all of a sudden I got really scared. It's not a nice thought that somebody's out to murder you, but—well, all of a sudden I realized that meant kill. I mean somebody wants to kill me. I got scared."

"It'll be all right now," Rourke said as reassuringly as he could make it sound. "I've brought you the best man in the world to help with something like this. Let's go where you can tell Mike here all about it."

"There's a summer house out on the back of the lawn facing Indian River," she said. "Nobody can get close to us there. I've already set out the makings for drinks."

"That sounds great," Shayne said. "Let's go there then."

Before they had crossed the lawn to the little white columned pergola one of the phones in the big house was in use.

A woman's finger dialed a number on one of the Miami exchanges. When the phone at the other end was answered, the woman said: "I thought you should know. That guy from the paper just came over. He's here now. She must have called him from outside."

"You mean Rourke of the *News*?"

"That's him. The one you told me to watch out for. He wasn't alone either. He had another man with him. A big guy with red hair. Real hard looking. Big."

"You hear the redhead's name?"

"I think she called him Shell or Shay or something. I couldn't get close."

"That would be Shayne. Mike Shayne the private detective. He and Rourke are old buddies. You watch out for that one. He's smart and he's tough. If they bring him into this thing we're going to have to act fast."

"Oh no," the woman's voice said. "You know how I feel about—"

"You know what we have to do as well as I do," the voice on the phone said. "Now get off

the wire before somebody picks up one of the other extensions and hears us. Get on in there and try to hear what they're saying."

The line went dead from the Miami end.

THE LITTLE SUMMER house on the Barker estate was just a thing of tile flooring and white wooden pillars roofed over against the hot South Florida sun. It sat just back of the sea wall and fence which separated the beautifully manicured lawn from the waters of Indian Creek. Ellen Barker already had an ice bucket, bottles and glasses on the table under the roof.

She and Rourke put whiskey into their glasses. Mike Shayne took brandy after an appreciative look at the bottle's label. None of them touched the ice bucket or bottles of mixers.

"You may think I'm losing my mind," Ellen Barker said to the two men. "There are times when I think maybe I am. Still, when I found out this morning that the brake line on my car had been cut, I knew I couldn't sit around and wait any longer."

"Could it have broken by accident?" Rourke asked her.

"No it couldn't. Pete, my mechanic, is a top man and he says it was cut. Besides this isn't the first time someone has tried to kill me."

"Tell us about the other times," Mike Shayne said with interest. "How can you be sure?"

"I sleep in an air conditioned bedroom," Ellen Barker said gesturing towards the house. "The second floor corner windows you see there. I like the conditioning on at night. Since they built all those high rise condominiums across Indian Creek there's a lot of noise at night.

"Of course the conditioner is reverse cycle for heat in cool weather, but there's also a fireplace with a gas log that I use sometimes. Two weeks ago I woke up in the middle of the night. I'm usually a sound sleeper, but something disturbed me. It's lucky I did. The air conditioning was turned off and the gas log turned on but not lit. The room was filling with gas."

She stopped there.

"I see," Shayne said. "If you hadn't come awake you'd have been overcome with gas within minutes. Are you sure that couldn't have been an accident either?"

She gave him a long, level look. "Of course I'm sure. I distinctly remember turning the air conditioner on. This time of year I don't touch the gas log. I'm absolutely sure somebody

else came into my room after I fell asleep."

"Mike had to ask," Tim Rourke said.

"I believe you, Mrs. Barker," Shayne said.

"Call me Ellen, Mike."

"Okay then, Ellen. Who could have gotten in the room besides yourself?"

"Anybody could, I guess," she said frankly. "Since that happened I've kept the bedroom door locked and bolted at night. I never did before. After all, why should I? Any of the servants could have walked in. For that matter any intruder who got into the house itself and knew where I slept could have also walked through the door."

"So anybody had the opportunity, as pretty near anybody who knew what they were doing could have gotten to your car. That doesn't narrow the field much, does it?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't, Mike Shayne," she said. "But aren't you forgetting something?"

"He probably is," Tim Rourke said and laughed.

"What did I forget?" Shayne asked.

"From what I know about police work," Ellen Barker said seriously, "they always look for two things when they try to find a killer. One's opportunity, and in my case that doesn't help at all. The opportunity was wide open."

"The other is motive," Shayne finished for her. "Does that help?"

"Of course it does. Only one person really has a reason to want me dead bad enough to try to kill me. Like I tried to tell Tim, it has to be my sister."

"Then where do I find your sister?" Shayne asked.

"I don't know," she said. "That's what you're hired to do."

III

A YACHT went north through the sparkling blue waters of Indian Creek and the waves of its passing lapped against the sea wall where they sat.

Mike Shayne finished the brandy in his glass and leaned back in his chair.

"You're going to have to explain that," he said to Ellen Barker.

"I told Mike I never knew you had a sister," Tim Rourke added as he refilled his own drink.

"Nobody knows," Ellen said. "At least nobody but Rod and I and the lawyers."

"Rod was Ellen's husband," Rourke explained. "He died last year."

"That's right," Ellen Barker said. "You knew I was a widow

of course. Rod died very suddenly of a heart attack. He was a lot older than I, and all the money—this house, the trust funds, all of it—was his."

She paused. The two men nodded but said nothing.

"Rod and I were both orphans," Ellen Barker explained. "The difference was that I was raised in an orphanage and then a foster home, and Rod grew up in a palace with attorneys and trustees and an old maiden aunt to look after him. By the time we married Rod's aunt was long dead and buried. As far as we knew, neither of us had anyone at all but each other."

"No one?" Shayne asked.

"My parents died together in a car accident. Father was a working man. They left nothing but a little insurance. The State put my baby sister and myself in an orphanage and we were adopted out in different foster homes. By the time I got old enough to try to trace things nobody had any record of why my parents' relatives might have been."

"Surely a name can be traced?" Tim Rourke asked.

"Smith?" she said. "My parents had just moved to the State where they died. After I married, Rod and I tried, but whatever trail there might have been was long cold by then. All we really knew was that a sister a year younger than I had been adopted, but not by whom or where they'd gone."

"Surely the orphanage kept records," Shayne said.

"Of course they did, but there'd been a bad fire many years back. A lot of their records had been destroyed at that time, including those we really needed to see. You have to believe me we could find nothing."

Shayne said, "These things happen. But there's still one thing that puzzles me."

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "If I couldn't find any trace of my sister, then how could she possibly have traced me? I had all Rod's money and connections to help, and I couldn't locate her. How could she find me?"

"That's what I was thinking," the big private eye admitted.

"You forget one thing," Ellen Barker reminded him. "When Rod and I were married his money and position was important. It was a social event. The wedding was featured in the papers here and on the syndicated social pages, and in the big picture news magazines. Anyone in the country could have seen the photos—my picture—and read about my being an orphan. There was no secret made of it at the time."

"That could have done it," Shayne agreed.

"I know that did it," she said. "It was right after the wedding that I got the letter."

"Letter?" Shayne asked. "What letter?"

"A letter from my sister. A letter threatening me and saying that now she knew who I was she wanted money."

"But surely, Ellen," Tim Rourke broke in, "with that letter you knew where your sister was and what name she was using then."

"I wish we did," she said. "The letter was unsigned with any name. The last line: 'Don't call me, I'll call you.' It was typed on inexpensive store stationery and postmarked from downtown Chicago. We tried to trace it. Believe me, we tried, but it all came to nothing."

"Maybe if I could see the letter," Shayne said.

"Our lawyers have it," Ellen Barker said. "My lawyers now. With our other papers. I'll give you a note instructing them to let you see it. I don't think it will help though."

"What did it say?"

"In brief, Mr. Shayne, it threatened me. It said the writer was my sister and that she was ill and poor. She wanted a lot of money. It was her right and she would get it whether I liked the idea or not."

"What came next?" Mike Shayne asked.

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing at all, Mr. Shayne. Rod and I couldn't understand it. I showed him the letter of course. We had no secrets from each other. We waited, but there was no other letter. No call. No contact at all."

"I don't get it," Tim Rourke said.

"Neither do I." Mike Shayne was interested now. "She should have followed up. A contact like that and then nothing at all doesn't make sense."

"I know. We couldn't understand either."

"Was she afraid of you?"

"She shouldn't have been." Ellen Barker showed genuine distress now. "We would have given her anything she wanted in reason. Rod took ads in the Chicago papers saying there was a home for her with us, begging her to make contact. She never did again. Not a word."

"Why should she be trying to kill you now?" Shayne asked. "All that was five years ago when you were married. I'd think she would have called you then. Can you explain what she has to gain by killing you that she couldn't have gained by coming to you then."

"Oh yes," she said. "I'm not a fool, Mr. Shayne. She has a motive. I inherited millions

from Rod—and my sister is my sole heir."

IV

AN HOUR later Mike Shayne was in the offices of the prestigious Miami law firm which handled the affairs of the Barker Estate. The offices were in the DuPont building on Flagler Street and only a block from Shayne's own office.

It had been agreed that he would move over to the Barker home at least temporarily in order to give Mrs. Barker maximum protection.

Shayne's lovely secretary and good right arm, Lucy Hamilton, would have a bag packed and ready for him at the office when he left the attorneys, so that he could drive right back across the causeway to Miami Beach.

The senior law partner who handled the Barker estate was out of town on business on this particular morning, so Shayne had been turned over to the senior's junior assistant, a blond young man named Nicholas Patterson.

Patterson sat across the heavy mahogany table in the legal conference room and leafed through a thick file of papers.

"I think this is what you're looking for," he said finally and

produced a paper from one of the legal folders.

The letter had been enclosed in an outer sheet of heavy plastic to protect it against handling. Shayne could see traces that told him it had once been carefully dusted for fingerprints. It was written on one side of a single sheet of cheap notepaper.

Shayne read:

Dear Sis, dear sister, Dear loving (?) or unloving sister. I seen you in the papers, you and that rich man you married. Why don't you think of me. I think of you. Remember the orphan home St. Mary's. Remember we are sisters. Now you are rich and I am not. I am poor and sick. I want some from all that money you have. I want what is my

share or else you will get hurt. Or else you will be sorry. I want my share you think about it. You think real good about it. When I am ready I'll call you. Don't call me—I'll call.

That was all there was to it. The grammar and punctuation were poor, but the meaning was clear.

Patterson tendered the envelope in another sheet of plastic. It too was typed and postmarked from the central Chicago postal exchange. There was no return address.

"I understand they tried to trace it and got no place," young Patterson said. "I wasn't with the firm then."

"You are familiar with the Barker estate now though?"

"Oh quite, sir." Patterson looked almost smug. "I suppose you realize that the senior partner in a firm like this one usually delegates most of the routine details of his practice. In a manner of speaking you could say that I handle the estate at this point."

"I'd like to see Mr. and Mrs. Barker's last wills then."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne, but I really don't have the authority to let you look at those papers."

"Well, at least maybe you can answer one thing," Mike Shayne said. "Mrs. Ellen Barker told me that by the provisions of those wills Mrs. Barker's sister Alice is sole beneficiary of the estate on her death. Is that true?"

"If Mrs. Barker told you, Mr. Shayne, I wouldn't think of contradicting her."

"Oh, come on," Shayne said. "That's the legal eagle singing, man. I don't doubt Ellen Barker. What I want to know is, is that legally binding? Would those wills stick legally if Mrs. Barker were to die?"

Young Patterson leaned back in his chair, holding a sheaf of papers in his left hand and pinching his chin with his right. He appeared to be thinking, and in that moment Shayne was curiously impressed with the young man's eyes. They were a lot older and more mature than his face.

"I can assure you unequivocally that the will would hold up in court," he said finally to Mike Shayne. "It's a curious situation. There are no other heirs on either Mr. or Mrs. Barker's side. The sister you referred to is named and inherits everything outside of a few charitable and personal bequests of no great importance. The wills were drawn by this firm, and they will hold."

Shayne thought that over. One big hand reached up and

the thumb and forefinger pulled at his ear lobe.

"I understand that the sister hasn't been located," he said finally. "What happens if she can't be found at the time Ellen Barker dies?"

"That's been provided for," Patterson said firmly. "The estate will be held in trust until the sister or her heirs come forward or are located."

"Thank you," Shayne said. "That's all I wanted to know for now."

WHEN HE LEFT the lawyer's office Mike Shayne walked up Flagler Street to his own second floor office. Lucy Hamilton was waiting for him there. She had gone to Shayne's apartment down near the mouth of the Miami River and had packed a bag with the things he'd need for a short stay on the beach.

Tim Rourke was with her, keeping a relatively silent vigil over by the window with a bottle of Mike Shayne's best brandy and a glass.

"I'm going with you, maestro," he told Shayne. "I think whoever wants to do in Ellen will likely make another try, and I want to be in on the story. I can help you look after her."

"Neither of you can actually guard her when she's going to need it the most," Lucy Hamilton said suddenly. "At least I hope neither of you can."

Mike Shayne got the point. "You mean when she is asleep."

"That's it exactly. At least one try was made by somebody who got into the bedroom without her hearing him. I think you should take me along. I can stay right in the room with her. I agree with Tim that there may be another try soon."

"Sure," Rourke agreed. "The fact that both attempts at killing Ellen were made right at her home shows that the killer can come and go there at will. At least he or she knows all about what goes on there. If she knows you're in the case—that is assuming it's the missing sister like Ellen thinks—the logical thing will be to strike fast before you have time to uncover anything. Right, maestro?"

"You could be right," Mike Shayne admitted. "On the other hand I don't want Lucy in any danger."

"I won't be, Michael," she told him. "You know this killing has to look like an accident. If it is the sister, she can't sneak in the room and shoot both of us. In this State the law won't let you inherit from somebody you murder. It has to seem an accident so she can inherit without any trouble. With two people in the room a plausible

accident would be terribly hard to rig."

"That makes sense," Tim Rourke said. "I'll call Ellen and tell her to expect three house guests instead of two. Then we'll stop by Lucy's place on the way over and let her pick up whatever things she'll need."

It was late afternoon by the time the three of them got to the big house on Miami Beach.

They got settled in their rooms. Lucy was to share Ellen Barker's bedroom for the next few nights, but had a separate room for dressing down the hall. Afterward they came downstairs for an early dinner.

The meal was a light one. Cold soup, filet mignon, new potatos and asparagus were served by a cheerful young colored maid in the dining room. Dessert was a fruit tart with delicious hot coffee served in large cups with sugar and heavy cream.

It was almost dark outside by the time they finished and Ellen Barker told the maid to bring drinks and another pot of coffee to the summerhouse over by the seawall.

"It's really the only place I feel safe to talk," she explained as they walked across the grass. "Even if the house isn't bugged, there are too many places someone could hide and eavesdrop. Out here even after dark there's enough reflected light"—she waved at the wall of glittering lights from the highrise condominiums across the water—"for anyone to sneak up close enough to overhear anything. I'll keep a portable radio going to interfere with any possible bug. If we talk in low tones, it should be safe."

"Who are you afraid would listen?" Shayne asked. "I mean do you suspect one of the servants?"

"Right now I think I suspect everybody," Ellen Barker said. "I'll tell you about the servants, and you can meet them later."

"I'd certainly like to," the big detective said.

"Of course. And when you do I want you to take a good look at the cook. I keep wondering if she really is what she says she is. She talks with an Italian accent and is heavier than I am, but you never know. She could have been adopted by an Italian family."

"What makes you think she could be your sister?"

"Only one thing, Mr. Shayne. A small thing perhaps, but lately I've gotten mighty jumpy. I saw her come out of the swimming pool early one morning. The servants are allowed to use it when there are no guests. On her right hip, high up, she has a tattoo, a star in blue. My sister had such a mark.

She was marked with one star when we were small and I was marked with two. The same man did it. The stars are alike."

"Oh," Tim Rourke said. "I'd never have guessed."

"I have no intention of showing you, Tim." Ellen grinned. "You're going to have to take my word. The stars are alike. Of course, it might not mean a thing."

"Such marks are usually pretty much alike," Shayne agreed, "but I'll check into the woman's background for you. Anyone else?"

"One of the women at Mr. Tony's, where I have my hair done. She looks like me. The way she stands and laughs. I got a real start the first time I saw her. Sometimes I catch her looking at me kind of queerly too. Oh, I don't seem sure of anything any more."

"What other servants are in the house regularly?"

"Besides Dora—that's the cook I mentioned—there are two maids. They're both young girls. Then there's Roberts, who used to be my husband's personal man. Now he's sort of combination major-domo and chauffeur. You'd have seen him serve at dinner except this is his night out. Lastly there's Angelo, who keeps up the grounds, washes the cars, cleans the pool, that sort of thing. I hear him talking Italian to Dora sometimes."

"I'll look into them all for you."

"Have you thought of calling the police?" Lucy Hamilton asked.

"I've thought of many things," Ellen Barker said. "Of course, that was one of them. Only what could I say that they'd believe? The whole thing sounds fantastic, even to me."

"Don't try any fantastic yarns on Petey Painter," Tim Rourke said. "He only half believes the date when he's looking at a calendar."

"Oh?"

"He's talking about Chief Painter of the Miami Beach police," Lucy Hamilton said. "He's an old friend of ours, and I think Tim's right. The chief wouldn't be much help to you right now. He has a pretty literal turn of mind."

"On the other hand Chief Will Gentry over in Miami is an officer of a different stripe," Shayne said. "We've been good friends for years. I can have him check out possible police records and that sort of thing for your servants and anyone else you might suspect. It can be a big help. I'll call him in the morning from an outside phone."

It was full night by now but the reflected City lights made it

almost like day there on the lawn.

Ellen Barker took a cigarette from a silver case and lit it.

"That would be a real comfort," she said. "I would like to know more about them."

There was a heavy thud as a small object flew through the air and landed on the lawn beside the little Pergola.

Mike Shayne was on his feet almost before the thing struck the ground. Moving with a speed that astonished even Tim Rourke and Lucy Hamilton, he scooped up the object in one big hand and tossed it the few feet into the waters of Indian Creek.

There was the crash and thud of an explosion under the water. A small geyser flew up and drops splashed the summer house where they sat.

V

THE OTHER three sat paralyzed in their chairs for a long moment.

"My God!" said Ellen Barker at last. "My God, what was that?"

"A bomb, Ellen," Tim Rourke said.

"Not quite a bomb, but close enough," Mike Shayne said. "That was a hand grenade of the type the army uses. You can still buy them on the black market. Somebody threw it at us from back near the house. Luckily I had time to get it into the water before it let go. I think we'd all get back to the house and under cover as quickly as we can now."

"So do I," Lucy Hamilton said. "If there was ever any doubt about somebody wanting you dead, there isn't any longer."

The four of them got to their feet and walked quickly back to the big house. Mike Shayne watched the shadows and the shrubbery for any signs of movement, but there were none. The big man didn't actually expect another attack, but he felt it better to be safe.

Once inside they went to the downstairs study which Ellen Barker used as an office and where she kept her desk and household and investment files. The windows were fitted with metal storm shutters which could be lowered from inside as a hurricane protection. With these down, the door shut and the air conditioning running they could feel both private and comfortable.

"Should we leave the house?" Ellen asked.

"I don't believe that will be necessary," Mike Shayne said. "There isn't likely to be another attack on you very soon. However I am going out for a

short while. I want a list of all the servants here and the other people you mentioned, Ellen. I'm going over to see Will Gentry at Miami Police Headquarters. I want him to run a check on them. I'll be gone only a couple of hours at the most and I think you three will be perfectly safe if you stick together. Keep each other in sight."

"I don't feel as sure as you do," Ellen Barker said. "That was a terribly close thing out there."

Shayne shook his head.

"You may find this a little hard to understand, Ellen," he said. "I can't say I'd blame you for it either. But I don't think the danger was actually that real. I think whoever threw that grenade knew I'd have time to get it into the water, and counted on my doing exactly that. We were meant to be frightened, probably scared into making some foolish move or other. I don't think it was actually an attempt at murder though. Not this time."

"How on earth can you say that, Mike?" Tim Rourke asked.

"He means a hand grenade couldn't be an accident. Don't you, Michael?" That was Lucy Hamilton speaking.

"That's exactly what I do mean," Shayne said. "Remember we agreed that if your sister

is back of this—as I'm beginning to think she may be—then your death has to be accidental. A live hand grenade doesn't spell accident, even to a cop like Petey Painter. It spells murder."

"Then what was the reason—"

"For throwing the grenade at all? To scare you into losing your head. To frighten me away from the case. I can't know for sure. I do know a grenade explodes at a definite second count after the pin is pulled. A skilled grenade man would have thrown it timed to let it go off in the air as it reached us. Then we'd all be dead now. This one threw too fast, giving me time to get rid of the thing."

"I see. Anyway I know I have to trust you people, and you're the experts in this sort of thing. I'll feel safer with Tim

and Miss Hamilton here though."

"They'll stay right with you," Shayne promised. "Tim has a gun and knows how to use it, but I'm about one hundred and five percent sure he won't have any need to."

LATER THAT EVENING Mike Shayne shared brandy and cigars with his friend Will Gentry in the Miami Police Chief's office.

"You realize this whole thing isn't in my jurisdiction," Will Gentry said as he put a match to his cigar. "Not that I suppose it bothers you."

"An attempted murder is in any cop's jurisdiction," Shayne said. "Throwing a hand grenade at an old friend puts this one in yours anyway. Besides all I want you to do is get me some information on these people."

He took a sheet of paper out of his pocket and put it on the desk top. "Here are the names, last known outside addresses and supposed next of kin of the Barker servants," he said. "Ellen gave them to me from her personnel records. The murderer may not be on that list, but somebody who knows him is. Somebody had to tip off whoever tossed that grenade."

"Seems so," Gentry agreed.

"I've also put down the name of the woman at the hairdresser's place. Also the names of Ellen's parents, the orphanage she was raised at, anything else that might help locate whoever adopted the girl."

"I'll get a request out to the police in Chicago and the town where the orphanage is," Gentry said. "I don't really expect much, but they might come up with something that could help. We'll look at the servants' records in our own files and then send them back as far as we can."

He picked up the sheet and studied it. "Mike, you might have something here at that."

"What?"

Before he answered his friend Will Gentry picked up his desk phone and spoke into it for a minute. He turned back to Shayne.

"I just talked to Records. I think we have something on this beauty operator Adele Miller. That name rings a bell. We'll know in a few minutes."

It was at least ten minutes before the night duty man in the Records Division brought up a thin Manila folder and put it on the Chief's desk.

Gentry studied it for a moment, and then, his face impassive, passed it over to the big private detective.

Mike Shayne leafed through the few sheets in the folder.

"I'd say that was an interesting background."

"So would I," Gentry agreed. "Busted once for possession of marijuana. Known to hang out at some pretty rough dives on both sides of Biscayne Bay. Arrested three times for disorderly conduct by taking part in wild parties, but turned loose the next day. Suspicion of being a call girl. Suspicion of taking a thousand dollars from a convention tourist, but the man wouldn't press charges. No wonder the name registered."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "A pretty mod character all in all. Then the whole pattern changes five years back. None of these items are newer than that. About the time Ellen marries Barker and his millions, this Adele changes her pattern. She goes to beauty school and then gets a regular job. Maybe she still runs around some, but no rough stuff. Is the timing a coincidence?"

"I wouldn't know," Gentry said. "There's nothing in here to really tie her to the Barkers. Adele was born and raised in New York according to our info. Moved down here ten years back. Nothing says she was adopted. I'll try to run a check on that in the morning for you if you like."

"I like," Shayne said. "Meanwhile I think I'll go have a chat with Adele. It's still early enough so she should be up and around. You have her address here on her beauty operator license application. You check the servants for me too, Will. I'll call you back in the morning."

Adele Miller worked in a beauty shop on Lincoln Road in Miami Beach, but her home address was an apartment building in the close in North East section of Miami itself. The location was only a couple of miles from the downtown police headquarters in the sprawling city—county complex.

Mike Shayne drove slowly, turning over the facts of the case in his mind.

He became conscious then of a vague uneasiness, an almost physical sense of apprehension. He knew that feeling of old. There was a danger near which he did not consciously discern but which the finely honed senses of a man who lived much of his life in danger had detected anyway.

It wasn't long before the big detective pinned down the cause of his uneasiness.

A small black foreign car of the type usually nicknamed "the bug" was following him and keeping about half a block back. Now that he noticed the little car he had a vague recol-

lection of having seen one like it in his rear view mirror on his way over from the Beach to Gentry's office. He couldn't be sure about that of course, but he could make sure that the car he was watching now really was tailing him.

Mike Shayne drove about a mile out of his way, twisting and turning his route in an illogical pattern. The little black car stayed just a half block behind.

Shayne didn't really try to duck the bug or shake it off. As long as he knew who was on his tail he could deal with the situation. He headed back to his original destination east of Biscayne Boulevard.

The building where Adele Miller lived was an old twenty unit apartment that had begun to show signs of age. The landlord was probably waiting to sell the ground as part of the site of a new luxury highrise and would keep his overhead low till that happy day arrived for him.

Mike Shayne put his car in one of the parking spaces by the building. As he parked the black bug drove by. Shayne tried to see who was driving but the street was tree shaded and dark and he couldn't even make out whether the driver was a man or a woman.

"The way they wear their hair these days, it's hard enougn to tell even in daylight," the big man thought wryly.

He figured whoever it was would park somewhere out of sight down the street towards the Bay and wait for him to come out of the building again.

He found the number of Adele Miller's apartment on a door in the second floor hall. Light was coming through the transom over the door so the redhead pushed the bell. When it didn't ring he lifted one big hand and knocked on the door. He waited and knocked again.

Finally he heard somebody coming to the door. It opened a crack and a woman's face looked out. Shayne shifted so she could get a good look at him.

She was a very much made up blonde with a platinum dye job and dark, flashing eyes. She didn't look like Ellen Barker for sure, but on the other hand she didn't look totally unlike her. She was wearing a see-through blouse that did its job unashamedly and a pair of silver lame slacks.

"Adele Miller?" Shayne asked.

"Who wants to know?" said a man's voice from somewhere in the room behind her.

Shayne put one big foot in the crack of the door so it couldn't be shut. The woman

saw him do it but made no move to stop him.

Mike Shayne looked directly at her and smiled.

"I'm a friend of one of your customers at the shop," he said. "One of your best customers. Could be a lot better too."

"Who does the bum think he is comin' here this time of night?" the voice of the unseen man demanded. "Tell him to drag his tail out of here, Hon, before I bust him up."

The woman continued to look at Shayne, appraising his big muscular frame with an appreciative eye.

"There could be a lot of money in it for you, Adele," Shayne said. "A lot of money."

"What makes you think I could be for sale, big man?" she said for the first time in a low, throaty voice.

"It's not that kind of money," Shayne said in an equally low tone. "This could be really big money. Bigger than you ever dreamed of."

"I said throw that bum out," said the man inside.

Adele Miller looked out of wide eyes at Shayne and the look was an invitation. Then she stepped back and opened the door wide.

"Throw him out yourself if you can." she said over her shoulder.

The man inside came up off the couch and across the room in a lumbering rush. He was naked from the waist up and wore only sandles and a pair of widely flared, loud patterned knit slacks. As he came he got a switch blade knife with a six inch stilleto blade out of his back pocket and pushed the wicked blade out in front of him.

It didn't do him any good.

The man had been smoking pot or taking some sort of upper or downer drug. His eyes were glazed and his movements lacked coordination. He never stood a chance against the big redheaded private detective.

Mike Shayne got his left hand clasped on the wrist of the hand holding the knife and twisted. The knife hit the floor point first and stuck there, quivering.

Then Shayne drove a hard right chop to the man's jaw. The fellow lost all interest in any more fighting and hit the floor beside his weapon.

"Where do you want this put?" Shayne asked the woman.

She jerked a thumb towards the hall beyond the still open door.

Mike Shayne got the man by one arm and one leg and dragged him over the sill. Then he came back in and shut the door and saw that it was

locked. He left the knife where it stood, still trembling slightly, in the floor.

Adele Miller gave the big redhead a long look.

"At least you're all man," she said. "Okay, lover. Suppose you tell me what this is all about."

"I will," Shayne said. "Who was that?"

"Nobody important," Adele Miller said and shrugged. "I was tired of him a long time ago, but what can a girl do these days? So tell me all, lover. Mostly the part about the big, big money. That part I want to hear."

"You've got a customer at your shop named Mrs. Ellen Barker." Mike Shayne made it a statement.

"Okay. Yeah, I know her."

The woman's eyes were suddenly hooded and she moved a little away from Shayne. Something had put her on her guard.

"Did anyone ever tell you you looked like her?" Shayne asked. "This Mrs. Barker, I mean? Do you think you look like her?"

He waited but Adele Miller was back to intently watching him again.

"This is where the money part comes in," Shayne said.

The woman went and got a bottle of gin off the table and poured some in a clean glass and gave it to Shayne. She took a long pull of the stuff right out of the neck of the bottle for herself.

"Come off it," she said. "I thought you had something new to talk about."

"What does that mean?" Mike Shayne was genuinely surprised, but he was trying hard not to show it. "I wasn't kidding you, Adele. You answer a couple of questions right, and there could be some really big money in it for you."

"Sure," she said. "I know, lover. Half of all them lovely Barker millions. That's what you're talking about, isn't it? Only I won't do it."

She paused.

"You won't do what?"

"I won't make out like I'm Ellen Barker's long lost little sister, is what. It wouldn't work anyway."

VI

THAT ONE really did rock Mike Shayne back on his heels. For a minute he said nothing at all. Then: "Where did you get that idea? I didn't say anything about any sister."

Adele Miller drank some of her gin. "You didn't, big man, but you were about to. You don't think I couldn't spot that routine."

"What routine?"

"The same routine the other shamus—at least he said he was a shamus—give me. You was right at the point of telling me all I have to do is pretend to be her sister and get the big pay-off. Only I know it won't work."

"You're way ahead of yourself," Shayne said. "I wasn't going to suggest you claim to be anything you aren't. You're right I'm looking for Ellen Barker's sister, but for me it's got to be the real sister or nothing. Now who is this other man, and what makes you say he—or I for that matter—are private detectives?"

"I recognized you, Shayne," she said. "I've seen your picture in the *News* plenty times. The other fellow says he's a shamus. You can't prove it by me. He says this Ellen is all set to give half her money to baby sister if sister shows up."

"That's not exactly right," Shayne said when she paused, "but go on anyway."

"He says I look like I could be the sister," she went on. "What's more, he says he can draw the picture for me with no problem at all."

"Draw the picture?"

"Give me the dope to fill in the picture so Ellen will believe it. He says he has the dates and names and the proofs I can show her. It'll be a lead pipe

cinch he says. A walkaway from the field. Nothing to it."

Shayne drank some of the gin. It was raw stuff and he didn't like it but he needed something to soften the impact of what he was hearing. Right then he did believe that Ellen Barker's life really was in danger.

"What I don't get," he said finally, "is that you say you didn't buy all this. I don't know about half of all the millions, but I can say it's no secret Ellen's sister stands to get plenty if she's found. How come you turn down a chance like that?"

For a minute Adele Miller looked a lot older than her years. "I ain't sayin' I wasn't

tempted, lover. The only place a girl like me sees that kind of money is in the late-late teevy shows. Sure I'd like to be on the other side of the dryer at the shop with all them rich bitches that come in. Only it wouldn't work. I couldn't make it stick no matter what proof somebody handed me."

She paused as if thinking over what to say next. Then: "I got a police record, lover."

"So what?" Shayne asked. He didn't show that he already knew about the woman's record with the law.

"How could I make a phony story stick? They've got my prints. First time anybody investigated—and sweet Ellen would investigate unless she's the world's biggest chump for sure—they'd get the truth about me. The game would go zero then, zilch."

"I'm afraid you've got a point," Mike Shayne admitted.

"On the other hand," Adele Miller said, and with a new glint in her eye this time, "maybe it ain't quite all over for me yet. Maybe little Adele can still stay in the picture anyhow."

"Clue me in," the big man said.

"You can see it," Adele told him. "I know for sure by both you guys showing up that Ellen Barker really is looking for a sister. You claim to represent her. This other shmoe says he has proof to give a phony the right face. You catch?"

"I'm beginning to see the light," Shayne said.

"You go on and look real hard till that light shines bright," Adele said. "Suppose I say I change my mind? Suppose I get all this proof given me, whatever it is? What do you suppose sweet Ellen would pay me for that?"

"It could be worth money," the big redhead admitted. "That is it could if there really is any proof. Who is this guy says he can supply it?"

"I ain't fool enough to tell you that," Adele said, and Shayne could see that she meant it. "Right now that name is the only thing I got that's worth money. I ain't going to throw it away. You go see Ellen and you get me an offer. If it's big enough, I'll see what I can do."

And that was all Mike Shayne could get out of her.

Ten minutes later he left the apartment after promising to talk to Ellen Barker.

He barely got out the front door onto the sidewalk when he was rushed by the man he'd thrown out of Adele Miller's apartment. The man was still shirtless. He had a heavy rock in his hand. He was still high on whatever he'd been taking.

Mike Shayne dodged the clumsy rush and stuck out one foot.

The man tripped over it and stumbled out into the street, and that's when the car hit him.

The car was a small black 'bug' and it was coming up the street very fast from the direction of the bay. It hit the man hard, slamming his body into the trunk of a palm tree.

The little car didn't stop, but shot on up the street and out into Biscayne Boulevard traffic.

VII

NEIGHBORS who had seen the accident ran out onto the street. Mike Shayne knew they would call police and an ambulance. He didn't want to get further involved. One look at the crumpled body in the gutter told him that the man was dead. Apparently no one had seen the attack or noticed Shayne trip the man.

He went and got his own car out of the parking lot.

The last half hour had given the big man plenty to think about. Of course he couldn't really be sure that the little black bug which had run down and killed Adele Miller's ex boy friend was the same car which had tailed him all the way from Police Headquarters to this street. At no time had he been able to see who was driving the little car—or even if the driver was a man or a woman.

Suppose it was the same car. Was the driver out to kill the man he had struck in the street, or was he really aiming for Mike Shayne himself? Well, that could wait. No way of getting the answers to those questions right off the bat.

The most important thing Mike Shayne had learned, the thing that needed answering first of all, was the identity of the man who had propositioned Adele Miller to impersonate the long lost sister.

Here was a factor Shayne had neither expected nor reckoned on. A sister full of resentment, hate and bitterness and lurking in the wings was menace enough, but a man smart and ruthless enough to plan such an impersonation was quite a different thing. Such a man could be very dangerous indeed.

Whoever he was he probably knew all about Ellen and her letter from her sister and the search that followed. That didn't narrow the field very much though. Plenty of people from the police forces of Miami and Chicago to the private agencies Ellen and her dead husband had hired knew about that. Somebody could have talked too much. The thing wasn't a secret anyway.

Mike Shayne took one big hand off the wheel and tugged an ear lobe between thumb and forefinger.

The man's offer to supply Adele Miller with proofs of her new identity was another big question mark in the case. Did he have such proofs? And where could he have gotten them unless he was acting for the real sister? But if he was, then why did they need Adele? Why didn't the real Adele just come forth and make herself known?

Of course a clever man with money who knew the story could have bought forged evidence good enough to have fooled most people.

Why then offer it to Adele Miller? Apparently the man didn't know how vulnerable her past police record made the beauty operator.

He didn't think Adele knew anything about Ellen's will leaving the whole fortune to her missing sister. Adele was thinking in terms of a gift to the sister or a price to be paid for information, perhaps even of future possibilities for some very lucrative blackmail.

It was a very tangled web that had been spun about Ellen Barker—and now about Mike Shayne himself.

Shayne drove straight across the Julia Tuttle Causeway to Miami Beach and then to the Barker mansion. The front door was closed and bolted and Ellen Barker and Tim Rourke both came to the door to let him in.

Shayne had decided not to tell Ellen Barker what he had learned until the next morning. Time enough then to upset her with his news. In the meantime he wanted her to get a good night's rest. She would probably need it, the way things were shaping up.

Lucy Hamilton went up to share the big bedroom and the kingsized four poster bed with Ellen Barker. Lucy saw to it that doors and windows were securely locked. She knew that one or both of the men would be awake and alert during the balance of the night.

Both women were soon asleep.

Downstairs in the study Tim Rourke and Mike Shayne sat over a bottle of the best imported French brandy. Now that the women were safely out of earshot Shayne told his friend everything that had happened that evening.

Rourke was smart enough to catch the implications behind the facts.

"After that grenade business I knew Ellen was in danger right enough," the lanky news ace said, "but I thought it was simply a jealous sister. I was

half ready to believe the whole thing might be just to scare her, like you said that grenade might be. But now—"

"Pass me over that brandy," Shayne said. "Yes, now it begins to look like a professional job. It's no longer an angry woman but somebody who can and will plan things out. The motive has to be different than jealousy or revenge."

"The big motive," Rourke agreed, "to be specific, is a handful of millions of dollars. To a planner and a schemer on that scale it makes a motive worth killing for."

"Yes, it does," Shayne said, "and I think he or she has already killed for it once tonight. I don't think that poor slob who tried to jump me was run down by accident. I think somebody figured he knew too much and saw a chance to knock him off without any fuss and without it looking like murder."

'Or he could have been trying for you, maestro."

"Maybe when he started the car. That is when he saw me come out the door of the apartment house. Then rumdum jumped me and the driver of the car must have seen that too. He came right on and picked off the guy in the street. If he'd wanted me most, he could have hit me, but he'd have to swerve the little car up onto the sidewalk. There wasn't any swerve. He hit the man he wanted."

"You say 'he'," Rourke said. "Did you see the driver?"

"No I didn't, and it could have been a woman. Could even be the missing sister. However, I think it was a man. The only one I'm sure it wasn't is Adele. I left her upstairs."

"Speaking of Adele," Rourke said. "Isn't she likely to be the next one they go for?"

"Sure she is, but if I warn her she's likely to jump the county, and she knows things I need to know. I can't be over there to watch after her and here guarding Ellen Barker at the same time, and Ellen's my client. I'm going to have to bet Adele is smart enough to keep herself alive for a while longer without any help."

"Hold it," Tim Rourke said. His hand reached out and switched off the one lamp bulb burning in the room. "Hold it. I think somebody's coming up the path from the water."

Even as he spoke they could see a dim form approaching the house.

Then they noted that there were two figures walking close together.

"This is a corner lot," Rourke whispered. "Whoever they are they're coming in from

the rear of the side street that deadends at the water."

Shayne and Rourke moved quickly to the back of the house and out through the french doors leading to the lawn. They intercepted the two approaching figures before they reached the side door leading into the kitchen wing of the ground floor.

"Hold on a minute," Shayne said brusquely.

Both figures were women. They had been talking together in low voices and hadn't heard the two men approach. They jumped, and one cried out. The slighter, younger woman dropped her purse which flew open and the contents flew out and fell on to the gravel path.

"I'll scream and wake them in the house," said the older woman in a firm, if alarmed tone of voice. This one was taller and older than the other. Shayne could see a mass of dark hair coiled on her head. She spoke with an accent.

"Don't bother," Tim Rourke said. "We're from the house. We saw you coming and didn't recognize you at first. It's the cook and one of the maids, Mike."

"And you're the two gentlemen were here for dinner," the younger woman said "Remember, Dora, I described Mr. Shayne and Mr Rourke to you."

The speaker was young and good looking in a mod and flashy way. Her hair was piled up in an elaborate hairdo and her face heavily made up. Shayne recognized the maid who had brought out the food earlier in the evening, though now the trim uniform had been replaced by an outrageously mini-type skirt and a fringed frontier buckskin shirt.

"You're a bit late coming in," Shayne said.

"Been out with my boy friend," the girl said with a toss of her head. "Not that it's any of your business, mister. I work for Mrs. Barker, not you. The work's all done for the day anyhow."

"It's all right, Millie," the older woman said. "Mr. Shayne's working for Mrs. Barker now too, and I suppose it's his job to ask."

"So he asked and I answered," the girl snapped. She bent down and began to stuff its contents back into her purse. Tim Rourke squatted down on the walk to help her.

"Were you both out together?" Shayne started to ask the cook and then caught himself. "No, I don't suppose you would be on a double date."

The woman gave a warm and friendly laugh. "Oh no. I was visiting my old aunt. She lives in a room down on South

Beach, and I make a point of dropping in on her two or three evenings a week. The old get lonely. The bus dropped me on the corner just as Millie got out of her friend's car. Naturally we walked in together."

"I see," Mike Shayne said. From the way Dora spoke he was sure that the aunt would back up her statement. "How about you, Millie? Where did you and your friend go for the evening?"

The girl got up, stuffing the last of her possessions back into her purse.

"Now that really is none of your business," she said. "We went out for a good time and we had it. That's all I'm going to say. You want to make something out of it?"

She flounced into the house, followed a moment later by the cook.

Shayne and Rourke went back to the study.

"The girl's got spirit," Mike Shayne said as he picked up his brandy glass. "I've got to say that for her."

"Sure," Tim Rourke agreed. "Spirit isn't all she has though, Mike. I think maybe you better move her up a notch on your list."

"And what does that mean?"

"When I was picking up the stuff she spilled out of her purse," Rourke said, "I picked

up a wad of bills held together by a paper clip. I couldn't count it of course without attracting her attention, but there were at least seven or eight bills in the wad. I could tell that much just by the feel of it."

"So what does that mean?" Shayne asked. "I suppose Ellen Barker pays her help well. You have to to get help these days. A kid like that wouldn't trust her mattress or a bank. If she had some cash, she might as well carry it."

"Mike," Tim Rourke insisted, "I managed to give that stack a quick riff. I couldn't see it all, but every bill I did get a gander at was a C note. What's a housemaid doing with a roll of hundred dollar bills?"

VIII

THE TWO MEN took turns dozing on the couch in the study for the rest of the night. Nothing out of the ordinary occurred so that each of them managed to get a couple of hours' sleep.

Mike Shayne was awake at five-thirty when he heard the cook, Dora, come downstairs and begin moving about in the kitchen. When he smelled coffee he washed up in the downstairs lavatory and walked back to the kitchen.

Dora smiled at him and offered him a cup. It was hot and strong.

In the morning light the cook was a handsome woman. She didn't resemble Ellen Barker particularly but bore herself with an air of dignity and intelligence that Shayne noted at once. He wondered if she did have a star tattoed on her hip, and then laughed at himself for the thought.

Dora gave him a slice of coffee ring and butter to go with the hot coffee, and the big man accepted it gratefully.

"You're here about the business of Miss Ellen's sister, aren't you?" Dora asked.

Shayne was surprised. "I might as well admit it," he said. "How did you know about that?"

"I've been working here since right after the Barker's were married," Dora said. "What with all the talking they did about it then among themselves and the man from the lawyer's office in and out of the house all the time, it was impossible not to know what went on. Servants hear things, you know."

"I know they do," Shayne said. "Was Millie, the girl with you last night, here then too?"

"No, Millie's only been here about four months. The only other servant here now who was at the house then is Roberts. He was Mr. Barker's man from a long time back. This sister business was nothing to him."

"I see. I understand they hired private detectives to look into it at the time." Shayne held out his cup for more coffee. "You wouldn't happen to remember who they were?"

"Not their names, no," she said. "I never did know that. The detectives never came to the house here. Mr. Patterson, the lawyer, hired them over in town someplace. I don't even know if they reported direct to Mr. Patterson or to Mr. Barker himself. I do know the family was real upset about their not finding the sister, though. If it's important, I guess Miss Ellen might remember who they are."

"I'll ask her," Shayne said.

"By the way, who's the boy friend Millie was out with last night?"

Dora laughed. "I can't help you there either, I'm afraid. Like you said last night, the two of us don't double date. I never even saw this one close up. A young fellow. I think she calls him Ricky or Nikky or something like that, but I can't really be sure. Why don't—"

"I ask her?" Shayne finished for her. "I'll do that too later on when everyone's up and about."

The telephone rang then, and Dora answered it at the kitchen extension. She listened, then. "It's for you, Mr. Shayne."

THE BIG REDHEAD took the instrument from her and grunted a surprised: "Hello."

"Mike," it was Chief Will Gentry's voice. "I won't ask you straight out if you went by to see Adele Miller last night."

"Does that mean you don't think I'd give you an honest answer?"

"It means I don't think I'd want to hear the answer if you did give it."

"Trouble?" Shayne asked.

"We got a call from the manager of that apartment house about thirty minutes ago. The people across the hall woke him up. The Miller woman's door was open and they thought they'd heard a ruckus. When our boys got there they found the whole apartment torn apart."

"And Adele?"

"The Miller woman was flat on her face on the kitchen floor in a pool of blood. She'd been shot three times."

Shayne said, "Is she dead?"

"That's a good question," Will Gentry told him. "We got her to Jackson Hospital still alive and the last I heard two docs were working to keep her that way. She was so near dead though it was hard to tell the difference. She may even be dead by now."

"Did she talk?"

"Mike, people shot as bad as that girl are lucky to breathe, let alone talk. Unconscious all the time. If she did talk, what do you think she'd have said?"

"I wish I knew, Will. It would help if I could even guess. When was she shot?"

"The docs say they think she'd been on the floor a long time. Near as anybody can tell she might have been shot as early as midnight. That's a guess though."

"I'm coming over the Bay," Mike Shayne told his friend. "If she comes to enough to talk, I want to be there to listen."

"Her room is guarded," Will Gentry said.

Shayne said, "You can get

in, and you can take me with you. It's important."

He hung up the phone. Then he went to tell Tim Rourke what had happened.

Dora watched him go with a puzzled expression, but made no attempt to question the big man. She just went on getting ready to fix breakfast for the household.

The rising sun was at Mike Shayne's back as he drove over the causeway from Miami Beach. Ahead of him its rays struck sparkles and blinding flashes of light from the windows of the wall of highrise buildings that had grown up to line the mainland shore of Biscayne Bay.

Mike Shayne could remember when the only buildings that stuck up that high were the Dade County Courthouse and the old News tower. Those had been simpler days.

Jackson Memorial Hospital, named for Miami's first permanent doctor, had also changed and grown from a single ancient building to a towering complex of wards and wings and special facilities. Even this early in the morning the detective had trouble finding a parking space anywhere near the ward he wanted to visit.

Will Gentry was waiting at the nurse's station on the floor where police assigned patients were kept. There was a uniformed patrolman in a chair by the door of one of the rooms down the hall.

Gentry gestured at that door.

"They brought her back from the operating room," he told Shayne. "They were trying to get out the one bullet that lodged near her spine without killing her. There's a doctor and a nurse in with her now."

The police guard at the room door passed them both through without any question. It was a different matter with the nurse inside the room. She started by giving them a hostile stare, and then actually tried to push Will Gentry back out into the hall.

"Get out," she said. "You'd be in the way. Haven't you any respect for the dying? We've work to do in here!"

"So do we," Gentry said. "I'm sorry, nurse, but that's the way it's got to be."

The doctor who was working over the woman in the bed looked up.

"Let him be, Jean," he told the nurse. "He really does have business here. Besides I don't see that it's going to make any difference."

He turned to Shayne and Gentry. "I'm sorry Chief, but I don't think she's going to be able to tell you a thing. It's only a matter of minutes now. I

don't think she'll regain consciousness at all."

Adele Miller was white and drained of blood. She looked as if she were already dead except for a faint, rasping breath under the oxygen mask that covered her mouth and nose. They were giving her a blood transfusion but the elixer of life barely dripped into her collapsed veins.

"We're doing all we can," the doctor said, "but she was hurt too badly and lost too much blood."

Even as he spoke the body convulsed slightly and then was still. Doctor and nurse bent over her. When the doctor looked up he said only: "That was it. I'm sorry. She's gone."

"Better take the body to the autopsy room," Chief Gentry said. "The coroner will want to supervise this one himself."

"Not yet, Will," Mike Shayne said. "Don't move the body at all right now."

IX

CHIEF WILL GENTRY looked at his friend across the dead body of the woman in the hospital bed. "What are you talking about, Mike? I suppose you've got something up your sleeve, but I've got a right to know what it is."

"Sure you do," Shayne said. "I want the body left here for a little while and you three stay with it like you were still working over her. I'm going out to the phone at the nurse's desk and make arrangements for Adele to be transferred to a private hospital at Ellen Barker's expense. I hope plenty of the staff here overhear me do it so they can remember if anybody questions them later on. I'm also going to talk about calling in specialists from Baltimore and Boston for another operation."

"You want the killer to think she's still alive," Gentry said. "I can see that. But how the hell long do you think you can keep it up?"

"It won't have to be long," Shayne said. "When the ambulance from the private hospital arrives downstairs the four of us will put the body on a stretcher and start taking it down. We'll have an oxygen mask over the face and the nurse here holding up a plasma bottle plugged into the arm. We'll take a whole elevator for ourselves.

"When the elevator hits the ground floor there'll be a lot of confusion. The mask will be off Adele's face. The story is she regained consciousness in the elevator, spoke a few words that only I could hear and then died. You all take the body on to the morgue."

"All you're doing is making a target out of yourself," Will Gentry said. "It's an old trick but it might work."

"You have no right to use this body that way," the nurse said. "Hasn't she suffered enough? It's immoral."

"The woman is dead," Shayne reminded her. "All we plan to do is conceal that fact for a little more time. Besides, it may be the only way we can find the one who really made her suffer, the person who shot her down and left her to die. Think about that."

"He's right," the doctor said. "It may bring a killer to justice, and I don't really see what harm it can do."

A half hour later the charade Mike Shayne planned had been acted out to the full in front of an audience of hospital personnel and visitors.

Shayne and Will Gentry were standing on the steps in front of the main entrance of Jackson Hospital waiting for Gentry's assistant Lieutenant Maine to bring the Chief's car around.

"It isn't the first time you've made yourself a target," Will Gentry was saying, "and I don't suppose it'll be the last. I wish you'd let me assign a couple of my boys to tail you, just in case."

"I've got to go back to the Beach," Shayne said. "That's out of your jurisdiction. Besides you know if somebody does come after me and spots your boys, it would blow the whole thing higher than the One Biscayne Tower. I know what I'm doing, Will."

"I guess you think you do," the Chief said and lit one of his famous long black cigars. "One of these days you're going to stretch that luck of yours a little too thin. You've been taking long chances all these years and getting away with it. Sooner or later the law of averages is going to catch up with you, Mike. Sooner or later."

"Let's make it later, Will," Shayne told his friend. "I know what I'm doing, and I don't think I'm in any real danger right now."

Then the Chief's big black car pulled up to the curb and the two friends parted.

Mike Shayne got his own car and drove back to the Barker home on Miami Beach. By now the sun was well up. It was one of those brilliant, clear mornings for which South Florida had long been famous. Work-bound traffic was heavy in both directions on the causeway. Shayne tried to spot a small black bug tailing his own car, but could see no sign of it.

He was sure though that the killer of Adele Miller would make inquiries at the hospital

and be told that he, Shayne, had heard the woman's last words.

As Will Gentry had assumed, so long as the killer could think his or her name had been spoken by Adele Miller with her dying gasp, it made Shayne a target.

On the other hand there were some aspects of the matter that Mike Shayne had chosen not to discuss with his friend the Chief of Police.

Presumably this was an intelligent killer, capable of thinking up and putting into operation an elaborate scheme to provide Ellen Barker with a substitute sister. Unlike a thug, such a killer wouldn't go for Shayne in a blind panic. He would know there would have to be proof to convict anyone the dying woman had named, and he might be sure there was no hard evidence to be found.

He would also know that any name spoken had probably been passed on by Shayne to Gentry. Possibly it had even been overheard by the doctor and the nurse who were also in the elevator at the time. To kill Mike Shayne under those circumstances would merely tend to confirm the killer's identity as named by Adele Miller in the minds of Gentry and the others. A thug might not think of that. If the killer was the person

Mike Shayne had begun to suspect, he would.

No, the redhead didn't think that he himself was in any immediate danger. The elaborate charade he had had staged at the hospital had an entirely different object.

Mike Shayne gave the killer credit for being smart enough

to think as he himself would in similar circumstances.

If he was in the killer's boots on this fine bright morning, he knew that he wouldn't let himself be diverted from the main chance which had brought about the shooting of Adele Miller in the first place. Adele had died because she knew who was trying to bring about the accidental death of Ellen Barker. That seemed obvious to Shayne.

The killer had everything to gain if he carried out his original plot to a successful conclusion, and everything to lose if he did not.

With a trap about to close about him, he'd bend every effort to eliminate Ellen Barker first of all.

Shayne counted on the fact that this would take some time, at least time enough for him to get back to Ellen Barker and protect her. It had been almost an hour from the time of the fake death in the elevator before Shayne and Gentry had left the hospital. The drive to the Barker home would take another forty minutes, give or take a few.

Even if the killer had an informant who could tip him within minutes of Adele's announced death, Shayne was sure he couldn't reach Ellen Barker and kill her in that short time. The whole success of the murder would depend on its seeming to be an accident. Accidents aren't that easy to improvise and put into action. Besides Tim Rourke and Lucy Hamilton were at the home and on guard to protect Ellen Barker until Shayne got there.

Mike Shayne thought he had plenty of time to prepare for any eventuality. Nevertheless he railed at the morning traffic which slowed his trip and cut his margin of safety by precious additional minutes.

When he pulled his car into the driveway at the Barker house Mike Shayne was still at ease in his mind.

When Tim Rourke opened the door for his friend and the big man saw the shocked look on the lanky newsman's face, he realized at once that something very serious indeed had gone wrong.

"Thank God you're here, Mike," Rourke greeted him. "I called Will Gentry and he said you were on the way over."

"What's wrong?" Shayne demanded.

"It's Ellen Barker, Mike. She's missing. Kidnaped."

"What do you mean kidnaped? I left you and Lucy to watch her. Is Lucy okay?"

"Lucy's fine," Tim Rourke said. "She and Ellen slept late. They came downstairs half an

hour ago. The cook was fixing breakfast and Ellen must have walked down to the summer house for a minute. She can't have been gone more than five minutes before Lucy and I went looking for her. All we found was this."

Tim Rourke held out a sheet of paper, and Mike Shayne took it grimly.

X

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE read the note that had been left on the table in the Barker summer house by the water he realized how smart the killer in this case really was. The man or woman had been smart enough to think and act faster than the big detective had expected.

In effect he'd trumped the ace Mike Shayne had up his sleeve and very nearly won the game.

It took Shayne only a moment to tell that the note would be impossible to trace. The paper was cheap dime store stationary and the message composed of words and letters clipped from the newspaper and pasted on. He was absolutely sure that there wouldn't be any fingerprints.

"You haven't got much time," the note read, "so you do exactly what I say. Follow directions exactly. I have Mrs. Barker and I will kill her if you don't do just what I say.

"First you get two hundred thousand dollars in small bills and put it in the blue travel bag you find in Mrs. B's bedroom closet. That bag and no other.

"Don't worry about getting the money. Mrs. B's lawyers have her power of attorney for emergencies. They can give you the money when you show this note. This is an emergency okay.

"At exactly one o'clock this afternoon you have the bag in your car. Drive to Haulover Park and park your car near the fishing pier. Put the bag on the first bench as you walk out on the fishing pier. Then you walk all the way out to the end and wait exactly five minutes. When you are at the end of the fishing pier the bag will be picked up by a paid messenger who will not know what is in it, but will bring it to me.

"Then I will release Mrs. Barker.

"If you bring police or interfere or chase the messenger, a watcher will call me and I will kill Mrs. Barker. I mean it. Do exactly what this note says."

That was all.

"What are we going to do?" Tim Rourke asked. "We can't let him get away with this."

"I'm going to do exactly what this note says," Mike

Shayne told his lanky friend. "I don't see that I've got any choice."

"Of all the things to have happen, this is about the worst. A kidnaping on top of all the rest of this case. Isn't one case at a time enough." Tim Rourke sounded rattled.

"One case is all we've got," Shayne said. "Whoever started trying to kill Ellen Barker is the kidnaper, and the killer of Adele Miller, and the one who wanted Adele to pose as the missing sister. It has to be all one case."

"Then why the snatch?" said Lucy Hamilton, who had joined them as they talked. "What's the sense of that?"

"For one thing it puts the killer one up on us," Shayne explained. "He thinks Adele Miller may have talked to me before she died. If she did, his plan for the fake sister is up the creek and he may have to run to avoid trial for the killing. He can't be sure how much Adele said of course, but the kidnaping gives him a stake of $200,000 to run or defend himself with. Also it guaranties I won't put the police on him till he collects it."

"Pretty neat," Tim Rourke said. "I hadn't thought of that."

Shayne said, "And something else too. When he gets the two hundred grand Ellen Barker is as good as dead. For one thing she could identify him. I'm sure of that. For another, if he has a fake sister up his sleeve to inherit from Ellen, such a killing puts Ellen out of the way and the sister can't be blamed. Death by kipnaper isn't quite an accident, but the police would have a rough time proving a connection with the heir."

"You're still going to give him the money, Michael?" Lucy Hamilton asked.

"I've got to do that much, Angel," Shayne said. "I can't help that. But I think I can nail the killer afterwards in time to save Ellen."

"How?"

"Leave that to me. You two can help in another way, though. I'm going to need you both—here at the house."

Lucy Hamilton said, "That ransom note proves there's an inside man involved. Who outside the house would know where Ellen keeps her luggage or about the lawyer's power of attorney?"

"Inside man?" Shayne said. "I think inside woman is it. You two latch onto that maid, Millie, who had a wad of bills in her bag when she came in late last night. When I leave, you go in the house and Tim, you phone that young lawyer Pat-

terson I'm on the way over with a kidnap note.

"Then you grab Millie. Don't let her out of your sight. Later on you take one of the cars from the garage here and the three of you drive up to Haulover Park. Sit in the car in a parking lot where you can see the shore end of the fishing pier."

"She may not want to go," Lucy Hamilton said.

"She'll go," Tim Rourke said grimly. "I'll bribe her or threaten her with involvement in Adele's murder or tie her up and load her in the car. She'll be there, and if she shows any sign of recognizing the pick-up man, she'll talk. That's the idea, isn't it?"

"That's exactly the idea," Shayne said. "Now, Angel, you run up and get me that bag out of the closet. I've a lot to do before one o'clock."

Nicholas Patterson was waiting for Mike Shayne in the law offices in Miami. He read the ransom note with a grim face.

"You haven't any doubt that this is genuine?"

"No doubt at all," Shayne assured him. "Unless I deliver that money the way it says, Ellen Barker will be dead this afternoon."

"In that case," Patterson said, "We'd best set about getting the money together."

"You're sure you can get that amount together?"

"Absolutely sure," Patterson said. "With power of attorney —this office holds it and I have the authority to use it—I can easily raise that much. Actually in this instance it isn't even necessary to get an advance from the bank or to mortgage any of the Barker assets. Old Rod Barker always believed in having a substantial liquid asset pool. He kept a quarter million in cash in a safe deposit box as long as he lived, and his widow hasn't changed that arrangement. All we have to do is go over to the bank vault and load up that blue suitcase you brought."

"Sounds easy enough," Shayne said. "Then I'll take it on up to Haulover Park."

"No," Patterson said, "That isn't exactly the way it'll be done."

"That's what the ransom note says," Shayne said.

"I know. You take it to the pier," Patterson said. "Only I'm going to go with you. If you think I intend to let you or anyone else walk off with two hundred thousand dollars belonging to a client of this firm, you're out of your head. Where that money goes, I go."

"Suppose that scares off the kidnaper and he kills Mrs. Barker? The note says—"

"The note says not to be followed or bring police," the lawyer said, pointing to the paper itself. "I'm not the police, and I won't be following you. I'll walk right out on the pier with you away from the bag."

"But—"

"That's the way it's going to have to be, or we don't supply the money." Patterson was emphatic. "How do I know you didn't write that ransom note yourself for that matter?"

He saw the expression on big Mike Shayne's face and continued hastily. "Oh, not that I think you did. But you know perfectly well my superiors in this firm, including the senior partner who would handle this if he wasn't out of town, would insist on my going along. I have to insist."

Shayne thought it over for a moment, tugging at his ear lobe, before answering. "I don't like it. This sort of thing is better left to professionals. Still, I really don't have any choice if you insist."

"I do insist," Patterson said, "and you don't have any choice. So let's get going. If we're to get the money all the way up to the pier, there's no time to lose."

At exactly one o'clock, as the note had directed, Mike Shayne placed the blue suitcase full of ransom money on the first bench out from shore on the Haulover Park fishing pier just north of Miami Beach. He and Nicholas Patterson walked on out the length of the pier towards the end where a gaggle of small boys and old men were fishing for mackerel.

Shayne hoped that Tim Rourke and Lucy Hamilton were watching and had the maid, Millie, with them as he had directed. He wasn't familiar with the Barker cars and couldn't spot them from a distance. Moreover, he didn't dare take an obvious look around. Chances were good that the killer was watching.

The big man hoped the killer

didn't spot Lucy and Rourke. He might recognize them. Tim Rourke would have a gun on him of course, but that wouldn't help if the killer quietly faded away without going near the bag of ransom money. In that case Ellen Barker might well be doomed.

However Shayne was already committed to the course of action he had taken. He and Patterson walked on at a steady pace to the far end of the fishing pier.

Fifteen minutes later they were still there. Looking over his shoulder, Shayne could see that the ransom suitcase was also still sitting where he had left it on the bench.

"Something is wrong here," Nicholas Patterson said suddenly. "The kidnaper should have picked up that bag by now. The note was perfectly clear about the time and the place to leave it. Why should he delay?"

"I don't know," Mike Shayne said. "All we can do is wait a while longer though."

The big detective was beginning to be worried himself. Things weren't going as he had expected, and hadn't been ever since the lawyer had announced he was coming along on this ransom drop.

That wasn't what he'd expected.

"If the kidnaper doesn't show pretty soon," Patterson said, "we're going to have to assume he isn't coming at all."

"That will be bad," Shayne agreed.

"We'll have no choice but to pick up that bag and take it back to town," the lawyer said. "We can't leave it around until some curious tourist decides to appropriate it."

"Let's wait another fifteen minutes," Mike Shayne said. He saw the ruin of his whole plan to solve this case, and he needed time to think.

When he first read the ransom note Mike Shayne had been pretty sure that Patterson himself was deeply involved in this case. If not the actual killer and kidnapper, Shayne felt that the lawyer must certainly be an accomplice. Possibly he was the master mind behind the whole plot.

Whoever the killer was, he had to have the opportunity to know many things no stranger could have access to. The lawyer fitted into that picture. He would know all about Ellen Barker's missing sister and the search made for her. He had hired the private detectives who had made that search and might have held back from Ellen and Rod Barker some facts that had been turned up. He would know that Ellen suspected

Adele Miller of being her sister, and might have had secret proofs to supply Adele.

Patterson wouldn't have known about Adele's police record though. When he found out that, and that Shayne had been to see Adele, his plans would change. He could have killed Adele and her boy friend to cover his own tracks.

Then, in order to cash in what he could, he would think up the kidnap plot. He knew about the cash in the safe deposit box. A stranger wouldn't have. He could give the money to Shayne and then pick it up himself. Then he would kill Ellen Barker. That would make the missing Adele her heir. All Patterson would have to do would be to find another sister in Adele Miller's place and split the millions with her.

It had seemed simple and logical to Shayne.

If Millie, as Shayne thought, was Patterson's contact inside the Barker home she would know him when he picked up the ransom and give herself away to Tim Rourke and Lucy Hamilton. At least Tim and Lucy would see him pick up the ransom and could identify him later.

If Patterson was the killer, he'd out-thought the big detective though. Now all he had to do when no kidnaper showed was to pick up the bag and take it away. Shayne couldn't stop him or even object. The man was the Barker lawyer. He had provided the ransom and could legally reclaim it.

Once away from Mike Shayne, the man could kill Ellen Barker. Then he could choose between running for it with the two hundred thousand dollars or putting it back in the bank and betting on his ability to produce a "Sister" as Ellen's heir.

"Time's up," Patterson said. "Let's go, Shayne."

"Wait a bit longer."

"I can't wait any longer. The kidnaper's had plenty of time to get here, and hasn't showed. That money is my responsibility and I can't leave it lying around any longer."

He started to walk back towards the shore end of the fishing pier and Mike Shayne had no choice but to follow him.

For the first time in many years the big detective wondered if he had met his match.

He had a wild impulse to take the money and refuse to give it to the attorney, but he knew he couldn't. Patterson might be innocent. If he wasn't, he could still defy Shayne to find proof while Ellen Barker lingered and died where she was hidden.

They reached the shore end of the pier and Nicholas Patterson picked the blue suitcase off the bench where it still rested.

"You can drive me back to the office now, Shayne," he said. "I'll look after this while we wait to see if the kidnaper makes another contact."

It was then that the open convertible pulled out of the parking lot down the line and drove quickly up to stop a few feet from the two men.

Tim Rourke was at the wheel and Lucy Hamilton on the outside of the front seat. Between them sat a very grim faced Millie.

"That's your man, Mike," Tim Rourke called to his friend Mike Shayne. "The girl here fingered him."

Nicholas Patterson said: "What—"

Millie let out a yell then. "No, don't believe him. I never! Nickie, I never—"

"You did now," Mike Shayne said.

Then he felt the gun muzzle rammed into his back. The lawyer held it in a steady hand.

"Don't anybody move or I kill Mike Shayne," Patterson said. "And I start on the rest of you."

He set the bag down long enough to take Shayne's gun and drop it into his pocket. Then he picked up the money again.

"Millie and Rourke get out of that car," Patterson commanded. "Make it quick. Miss Hamilton, you stay in the seat. You're my hostage. If the boys try to follow, you die."

"Take me with you," Millie said.

Patterson didn't even answer her.

He got in the front seat of the car, held the gun on Lucy Hamilton with his right hand, and put the car in gear with his left. The car began to move.

The lawyer had never considered that Tim Rourke might have a gun.

Rourke got it out of his hip pocket and passed it to Mike Shayne. The big detective used it to shoot out both rear tires of the car before it had moved fifty feet away.

Patterson hadn't the stomach to make a fight of it then. He got out of the car with his hands up.

"All right," Mike Shayne said. "Where have you got Ellen Barker hid out? Who's watching her—her missing sister?"

Patterson almost laughed.

"Her sister has been dead for years," he said. "I should know. Her sister was my mother."

"I don't think I'll ever understand," Ellen Barker said when Mike Shayne and the Mi-

ami Police had found her tied and gagged in Patterson's apartment. "If he was really my nephew, why didn't he say so in the first place? I would have given him anything he wanted within reason."

"What that sort want is never within reason," Chief Gentry said. "If his mother had been alive or he could have produced a false mother, he'd have killed you anyway. You're an attractive woman. You could marry again and have a child. His best chance was to kill you while that will was still good. Then I suppose he'd discover who he was and claim to be the heir. Once you were dead, he would be the legal heir since his mother was already dead. It was an accident he worked for that law firm and that you married Barker, but it seemed to him that gave him his chance for all that money."

"The mind of a thief and killer isn't like yours, Ellen," Mike Shayne said. "Besides, both Nick and his mother hated you. That letter you got was genuine, he says. Nick had lost touch with his mother, but when he followed up the letter he found her again. When she died of a heart attack, he decided to go it alone. He might have gotten away with it too, if Millie hadn't given him away to Tim and Lucy in the car."

"She didn't give him away," Rourke said. "She never said a word when you two walked out on the pier. She stiffened up, though, every muscle tight as a banjo string. It had to mean something. While we waited for you to come back I decided to take a long chance and do what I did."

"It's a good thing you did," Chief Gentry said.

"If you hadn't he might have got away with the whole plot," Lucy Hamilton agreed.

Mike Shayne said only: "Brandy. I think I need a double brandy and as fast as I can get my hands on a bottle."

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I APOLOGIZE

Death was stalking me, out in the dark, even here by my side. They had planned it well. It was my last taste of Life—Unless. . .

by GIL BREWER

I WATCHED Myra come in the front entrance, cross the foyer, and step down into the broad living room. Something was the matter. She could not keep that fact from me. I knew her much too well. Glistening white teeth nibbled at her lower lip. One hand fussed with golden blonde hair, and the other slapped a black purse against the ice-blue skirt of her crisp suit.

I walked over to her.

"Oh, Harry—"

"Something troubling you?"

Abruptly, she gave a sob, and ran across the room, flinging her purse into a chair. She went to the mobile bar and began pouring a drink.

I put one hand across my mouth and stared at her back.

She turned, leaning lightly against the bar, holding the drink in a trembling hand.

"Myra, what is it?"

"Oh, Harry, it's awful!"

I moved across the room, worried. "You'd better tell me what's the matter, Myra."

She stared at me and swallowed. Then she said, "I've done something terrible." Her voice was pitched low. "You know how we fought over buying that Mercedes? You know I didn't really want to spend the money, and I just wanted an ordinary second car, Harry. But I gave in, didn't I?"

I nodded, but said nothing.

"Well, Harry. I didn't really give in. I went kind of crazy, I think. It was all the things, the things we don't agree on. You're expensive, Harry."

"Now, Myra. Let's not start that again. We're married, and there are bound to be moments of disagreement. It's true of any marriage."

"Stop, Harry. Let me tell you." She swallowed again, set her glass down, and her eyes were big and round as she watched me. "I was insane, Harry." She wrung her hands. "Oh, God. I don't know why I did it."

"Did what?"

She had me worried now This was not like Myra. Usually, she was quite contained. Too contained, actually, too cool.

She put her head in her hands. "I hired somebody to kill you."

I took a long breath. "You're kidding, of course."

She looked up. "I tell you, Harry. I did it. I went to bars, and I asked around, and finally this man came. He told me about another man, and I met him, and he's going to kill you."

My throat was a touch dry. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because—because I know it's wrong, now. After I thought about it, after I calmed down, I knew how wrong it was." She fixed her blue-eyed gaze on me. "Oh, Harry, sometimes I hate you. But I don't want you dead. What shall I do?"

I knew she was speaking the truth. Myra always told the truth. The way she acted only proved it more.

I scratched my chin. "You'll have to go see this fellow, and call it off, that's all."

"I tried."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I went to him. I told him. He just laughed at me. I paid him, you see."

"How much?"

"Six thousand dollars."

"And what did he say after he laughed?"

"He told me to get out, stay away from him. He said I'd hired him and he was going to do the job. It was ethics, or something." She paused. "Harry, can we go to the police?"

I turned and moved to the mobile bar, uncapped the bourbon decanter. I poured a half glass full, thinking, and trying to deal with fear that sprouted like pale mushrooms in my solar-plexus.

"There's no way of going to the police. They wouldn't do anything." I heard myself say that.

"Why wouldn't they?" She had come over by me, and her

fingers were tense on my drinking arm.

"They can't do anything until after the fact, Myra." I smiled at her, forcing it as best I could. "You know how much I love you. You know the happiness we've had. True, we argue sometimes. But that's normal. You've got to control yourself, darling."

"But what will we do?"

I took a long drink, emptying the glass. I turned, her hand still plucking at my arm, and poured another.

"Harry—please!"

"When is it supposed to happen?"

"Tonight. He's coming here. That's all I know."

"I see." I drank some of the fresh drink.

I would not bid good-by to this house. It was much too perfect a life. And, after all, Myra did love me, in her own peculiar fashion. Born of the rich, she sometimes tended to be careless of another person's desires, but she had her good side.

I was thinking fast. "What time is he coming?"

"I don't know. Late, I think. Oh, I told him you sit in your study till all hours. He brightened at that. Harry, what are we going to do?"

"I'm taking care of it," I said. I patted her arm. "Don't I

always take care of everything? We can't call for help."

"But Harry—"

"I'm going to meet him on his own ground, Myra. I have that P-38, from World War II. Remember? I'll wait for him in the study."

She stared and gave a deep sobbing sigh.

"Don't fret, darling," I said. "I lived alone for many years before I met you. I know how to take care of myself. He's an intruder, probably with a gun. It's only right to do the best one can, under such circumstances. Agreed?"

I took her in my arms, and kissed her forehead. "Just don't worry." I held her away. "Now, it's after six. Let's have dinner. Then you can go to bed, and I'll start my vigil."

"I won't be able to sleep."

I smiled at her. It was like her. The trouble was in some-

one else's hands now. She had no further real worry, except about getting to sleep.

"Run along," I said. "Leave it to me. I'll tell Winifred." Winifred was our cook.

"You sure everything'll be all right?"

I patted her chin. "You know it, Myra."

"Can—can you ever forgive me?"

I kissed her. "Of course, darling."

We ate dinner, had two more drinks. At eight-thirty, I sent Myra to bed. She was reluctant to leave me, which was pleasant. Winifred, the cook, had gone home.

I did not feel at all brave, but I knew I had to go through with this. The little devil had lost her mind for a time. I'd have to save us from the consequences.

I went to my study. It was a dark-paneled, book-lined room. Opening a drawer, I found the P-38, took it out, cleaned it, oiled it, and adjusted a fresh clip, with one cartridge in the chamber.

Was I foolhardy? I wondered. It would be either the killer or me. But, as I drew a chair to the center of the room, facing the closed study door, I experienced a heightening of excitement. My mind played around the edges of the coming scene. I hoped I would be quick. I wondered what the man would look like. I knew there must be no hesitance. Shoot quickly.

The chair was placed so it was away from the windows. He could not shoot me from behind. I sat down, rested the automatic in my lap, and began to wait.

No telling when he would appear.

I thought of her up there. Tossing in her bed. I thought of this house. I thought of the strange love that existed between Myra and me. I thought of my desires.

I dozed. One would not expect that to happen, but it did. Abruptly, I came awake. The study door was slowly opening.

I took one quick glance at the wall clock. It was eleven-thirty. The door eased open, and there he was. Powerful, square-faced, a gun in his hand, hanging at his side.

He saw me. He opened his mouth to speak, and at the same time his gun hand lifted quickly.

I was quicker. I shot him three times in the chest.

He fell to the floor. I got up, went over to him, and satisfied myself that he was quite dead. He carried a .45 automatic. It had fallen to the floor beside the body.

I slipped past the dead man, and stepped into the hall.

"Myra?"

I heard running feet. She came fast along the hall, her white nightgown fluttering about slim legs.

"Oh, Harry!"

She flung herself at me. I held her close, and kissed her hair instinctively.

"Come," I said. "Let me show you."

"I don't want to look."

"Now, Myra. Please come along."

We entered the study. She moved around the body, and leaned against my desk.

"Is that the man?" I asked her.

She nodded. "Yes. Oh, my God, Harry, you did kill him."

I smiled. I dropped the P-38 on my chair, and leaning by the body, picked up the .45 automatic the man had carried.

"Well, Myra," I said. "I always lived alone, and I've been thinking about it a lot lately. I was never really happy with you, but you had all the money. I admire this house, and with you around, I couldn't put it to best use."

"What do you mean, Harry?"

"This," I said. I shot her just once, carefully. A red blossom appeared on her white nightgown. She looked startled, wide-eyed, as she collapsed on the floor quite dead.

"Don't you see, Myra?" I said. "I could never really trust you again, after this. The intruder, whoever he was, shot you. And I shot him. It's perfect, Myra. Now I'll be alone. But I'll be quite happy. I apologize, Myra. Really, I do."

In the NEXT Issue:

DOUBLE DATE WITH DEATH

The New Complete MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

When little Kara Weitz came home that morning, she found her father dead. There was no one for the child to turn to except the big red-headed detective who had once put her father in prison. For Mike Shayne, the case led to the strangest and deadliest kidnaping of his career

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AS ELEANOR'S cream colored convertible emerged from the stand of pines she braked it to a halt.

There, silhouetted against the bright reds and yellows of the early autumn sunset, was the cross—just as Clara had foretold it earlier in the day.

For long seconds Eleanor sat frozen behind the wheel of her now stationary car, while waves of panic raced up her spine. There it was, the crucifix, with a human figure on it, set at a slightly drunken angle against the sky. Impossible, incredible, waiting there for her arrival at Birch Lake exactly as Clara had said it would be.

Not until a vagrant breeze caused limp coattails to flap lazily against the afterglow did understanding come to Eleanor. Understanding and with it relief that was almost more sickening than the terror it replaced. It was a crucifix, certainly, but it was also a scarecrow, arrayed in the battered top hat and tails of men's evening regalia a generation ago.

Still, it had been a narrow-

The Night Visitor

The mansion was quiet, but she felt the presence of someone else in the room—and then a bony hand reached out to touch her, as cold as the grave...

by AMANDA WELLDON

rattling experience, the more so because it had been so clearly predicted.

Eleanor mentally retracked the other predictions Clara had offered her over the creamy chicken hash with madeira at the fine old Boston restaurant.

Number one had been the cross, of course, and it was now fulfilled. What had been the others?

She recalled a tunnel of

darkness, an image of evil in the night, and a dangerous visitor against which her weapons would prove useless.

It had always puzzled Eleanor that her former stepmother should have a firmly established reputation in Boston, of all places, as a foreteller of things to come. During the brief years of her marriage to Eleanor's father, Clara had proved herself to be the epitome of the hard-headed, efficient, materialistic, well bred New England woman of sense.

Her invitation to lunch had come out of the blue. It had been months since they had more than conversed over the telephone, and then only over family matters, mostly concerned with the management of Eleanor's father's estate, of which they were co-trustees. Since Eleanor, despite the difference in their ages, was also strong and hard-headed despite the disaster of her own brief marriage to Alan Herrick, a not unnatural coolness had sprung up between herself and her mother.

Not until the Turtle Soup Olerosa was finished and the chicken hash half consumed had Clara mentioned the matter of Eleanor's projected trip to Birch Lake. Even then, it was to urge her strongly against going.

Eleanor, who was more than half minded to put off the drive to New Hampshire and the old summer estate she had inherited when Alan died, had been startled by Clara's intensity. Not unnaturally, she had asked her former stepmother why she was so against it.

Clara, a handsome golf-tanned woman who wore her half century jauntily, looked long at Eleanor before replying. Then she said, "Eleanor, you know I have never troubled you with the professional side of my life. You have never indicated the slightest interest in the so-called supernatural."

Eleanor shrugged, said, "I've never had a trace of a psychic experience in my life, Clara. How could I be interested?"

"Your father respected it, Ellie. I don't know whether he ever told you, but he followed Gerard's advice on his investments for the last five years of his life."

Her stepmother's "Gerard," she well knew, was her regular communicant with what Clara invariably referred to as "the other side." Eleanor had always suspected that the sizeable sum her father left in their charge would have increased with or without "Gerard's" handling but had no desire to argue the matter.

Since Clara said nothing, Eleanor said, "I take it Gerard is

against my going to Birch Lake."

"Dear me, *no*!" The older woman laid down her fork. "Gerard is never *for* or *against* anything. He simply is as knowledgeable about time future as he is about time present and past and, through me, he communicates fragments of his knowledge."

"Has he ever been wrong?" Eleanor asked.

"Never." The reply was unequivocal.

"And what does he say is going to happen if I go?"

Almost matter of factly, Clara had told her of a crucifix, of a tunnel of darkness, of an image of evil in the night, and a dangerous visitor against which her weapons would prove useless.

Well, Eleanor had thought as Gerard's warnings continued from Clara's firm and well cut lips, *she's trying to scare me off!*

From that moment of realization on, the proverbial wild horses could not have kept Eleanor from making the trip to Birch Lake. Nor was it mere Yankee mule-headedness that impelled her to defy all esoteric warnings. An aroused curiosity lay equally strong within her.

She had inherited the Lakeside property without strings of any kind when Alan disappeared, presumably drowned in

the lake itself. The seven-year wait demanded by law had ended six months earlier, the demands of the probate court had long been cleared. No one—no one—had the slightest right to prevent her selling the ramshackle old mansion with its outbuildings and four hundred acres of surrounding farm and woodland if she chose to do so.

She had expected protest from her former father-in-law, Alan Herrick, Senior, when the resort development corporation first indicated interest in the Herrick property. She had

sought to forestall his objections by making a rent and tax-free residence for the elder Herrick an integral part of the deal—and she had been scrupulous about keeping him fully informed as to what she was doing. She had even arranged quarters and employment for the Patons, the mother, father and daughter, who "did" for Alan, Senior as their fathers had "done" for an older generation of Herricks before them.

But no objections had come, nobody had tossed any sort of monkey wrench into the deal. Eleanor's final trip to Birch Lake was more formality than necessity, an in-person check on the spot the attorneys of both sides insisted upon.

No motes, no beams, no hand-sized clouds on the clear horizon—until Clara and her unseen communicant sprang their bombshells over the chicken hash at Locke Ober's. . .

Now here was presage-fulfillment number one, the crucifix. *Score openers for Gerard*, she thought. She hoped the other things foretold proved as harmless. Still, as she took the winding, tree-framed turns that led to the old house itself, Eleanor continued to feel a faint stiffness in the hairs at the nape of her neck. It had been, for all of its inanity, an unnerving experience. . .

She emerged from the close binding of pines and birches into the large clearing at the far end of which Lakeside stood, its upper windows still lit with bright orange flame by the sunset. Actually, the house was an architectural Reign of Terror monstrosity dating from a century ago.

If it was cool in the summer heat, it was almost impossible to keep warm in wintertime. Its pale brown sandstone construction was lined with heavy wainscotting and brocaded wallpapers of an era mercifully long gone. Its many hallways, niches, oriels and windowseats, like its several pantries, were a monument to wasted space.

Yet, lit by the setting sun, it looked as properly in place as if it were a mezzotint structure of the Italian lake district in the brief twin flames of Shelley and Byron. Slowing her approach, Eleanor noted that the lawns were emerald green and smooth, the landscaped trees and hedges neatly pruned, the asters and other autumn blooms in their carefully nurtured beds as bright and orderly as greenhouse blossoms.

Although Eleanor had given virtually no notice of her arrival, she derived a definite impression that she had been expected and her arrival desired for months—although this was

her first visit in more than four years.

The old house was in pie-á-la-mode order, the massive dining room silver brightly polished, the fine old Chinese and Persian rugs more lustrous than Eleanor remembered, the hundreds of windowpanes shining and spotless, the as-valuable-as-it-was-venerable furniture without a trace of the threadbare.

The unpleasant aftertaste of Eleanor's tragic widowhood had caused her to forget the charms of the Herrick manor. It had caused her to forget the charm of the persons who served it as well . . .

The Patons were older of course *wasn't everybody?* she thought with unseemly irreverence as Henry answered her ring at the doorbell. But they carried their years well and their warmth of greeting almost made Eleanor forget how horrid her life with Alan Herrick, Junior, had become before the storm driven night of disaster she had not the slightest wish to remember.

Henry Paton, old-fashioned Yankee straight-razor in shape and carriage, did not wear a butler's uniform—yet in his short dark jacket and close-fitting grey slacks he somehow, perhaps through his unshakable inner dignity, conveyed the impression of wearing livery.

His wife, Verna, when she appeared beaming from the nether regions of the old mansion to greet her former chatelaine, was spotless and roly poly in starched white, the gold rims of her pince nez gleaming with hospitality. And little Angela, whom Eleanor remembered as a leggy, coltish sub-teenager, was still leggy but no longer coltish, a reserved, grey-eyed off-pretty young woman who performed her duties in assistance of her parents' labors with effortless smoothness that verged on grace.

Eleanor's father-in-law mixed the inevitable drinks as usual with the flair that had first attracted Eleanor. Her own upbringing had been straightforward upper-case New England, comfortable, disciplined, prosperous but never extravagant. If her father had a way with hot buttered rums, he could not tell one brand of champagne from another, while vintage remained as mysterious as Aramaic or Sanskrit.

Eleanor had attended good schools tailored to others like herself, had been expected to continue her studies (for what? she often wondered) in one of the Seven Sisters—and would have but for an August visit to a schoolmate whose family summered in Bar Harbor. There she

had met and fallen in love with Alan Herrick, Junior.

It was her introduction to a new and fascinating world, a world where charm and beauty and the art of being interestingly attractive, as well as rich, were the gods at whose scented feet its devotees worshipped.

In Eleanor's world, it was considered a major disgrace for a boy to flunk out of school or college. Alan had not merely flunked out of school—he had been fired for a series of hair-brained naughtinesses with girls and drink and explosive practical jokes from a full spectrum of America's most expensive private educational institutions.

Yet, instead of feeling shame, he laughed at the experiences—as did his friends—and no one seemed to hold him in disrespect. Career? He wanted none but merely money to indulge his way of life—through an unending series of speculative deals, most of which, Eleanor suspected, would not have met the approval of the solemn faced State Street trustees who handled her own family affairs.

He captured Eleanor's treasured virginity effortlessly on a moonswept beach, recaptured it as effortlessly two nights later on the Irish linen sheets of a guestroom bed. When he proposed marriage before the week was out, she listened to his proposal with disbelief.

"Why?" she asked him. "What have I left to give you?"

She still did not know the answer. It had not been money—there were scores of young women far richer than she who appeared quite willing to accept him on any terms. Nor could she believe that love had impelled him—love was far too simple an emotion for a young man like Alan Herrick, Junior.

His reply, typically, had been an embrace initiated in soft laughter and concluded with both of them in a condition beyond words. Perhaps, she thought, it had been love, at least in part—or something as near love as an Alan Herrick, Junior, was capable of feeling.

There had been a whirlwind wedding and honeymoon, and then Alan had brought her to Lakeside. There they lived the brief years of their marriage, Alan, Eleanor and Alan's father, as well as occasional visitors. There they had lived and loved until the night young Alan vanished . . .

It was a fine old house, Eleanor thought as she moved along the carpeted upstairs hall. As she reached the head of the stairs, she stumbled over something soft and furry that emitted a furious screech. She felt herself falling as the big

orange cat darted angrily away, felt herself heading out over the carpeted stairs in what had to be a disastrous crash dive.

Then she was caught by a strong pair of arms, caught and held and gently set down upright, on the top step. A pair of green eyes met hers evenly.

A flat young female voice said, "Careful, Mrs. Herrick. You have to watch your step with animals in the house. You could have had a bad fall."

Eleanor barely suppressed a shudder. There had been an instant, while the girl held her bodily in mid-air, when Eleanor had thought that instead of saving her, Angela was going to hurl her over the banister to the hardwood floor fifteen feet beneath.

The cold green eyes that looked into hers were unreadable. Eleanor wondered what emotion they masked. Was it malevolence? If it were, she wondered why . . .

By the time she reached staircase bottom, Angela felt something close to relief. Clara's Gerard had said nothing about tripping over an orange cat. The fact that he had missed this one took much of the portentiousness out of the scarecrow "crucifix."

Composing herself, Eleanor went on to join Alan Herrick, Senior.

SEATED ACROSS the table now from her father-in-law, Eleanor was seized with a sense of timelessness, a feeling that clock and calendar had rolled backward and that she and Alan were once again dining alone during one of his father's infrequent absences.

She had not met Alan, Senior, until the day of her wedding. He had flown back from Nassau, where he was visiting, barely in time for the ceremony. Her first view of her father-in-law had been three-quarters rear one and she had thought him her fiancé. There were, to confound her, the same slim figures, the same neck and hairlines, the same typical trick of standing with one hand in a trousers pocket and the head cocked slightly the other way.

Nor, when Alan, Senior, turned to face her, had her confusion abated—for he looked far more like a twin than a father. When she remarked upon the father-son resemblance, he had smiled Alan's dazzling smile and replied in Alan's casual accents, "Ah, my dear, a good suntan hides a multitude of years—and sins."

There was not, she found, a multitude of years between parent and child—a mere two decades. And when she perused the family album, she discovered that beneath bygone fashions in clothing and uniforms, behind walrus mustaches, mutton chops and dundreary whiskers, the likeness had persisted for generations in the family.

When she mentioned it to her Alan he had seemed to withdraw from her ever so slightly and had shrugged it off with, "A little likeness can be a dangerous thing, darling."

Shortly afterward, Alan, Junior, had grown a mustache—and, returning from a trip to Philadelphia, his father had smiled at sight of it and congratulated him upon its trimness. Then Eleanor and Alan had gone to visit her family in Milton and, when they returned, Alan, Senior had been sporting a mustache that matched his son's almost hair for hair.

This had triggered the first of the conflicts between them that had culminated in the still unexplained tragedy of Alan, Junior's, death. But now, seated across the fine old mahogany table, Eleanor felt no wish to recall the bad times and the ultimate horror of the storm-tossed night that brought her three-year marriage to its abrupt and tragic end.

Rather, she wished to let the clock turn itself back to the only real time of happiness she had ever known, to let the past reclaim her, wrap her in the security blanket of warmer memories, to wish that events that had happened were still ahead and yet to occur.

She wished—what did she wish? Regarding the face of the man who so closely resembled the one man she had ever truly loved, she wished—for what?

And why, beneath the crust of comfort, did her diaphragm feel the unmistakeable tugging of gut terror?

II

THE DINNER, as always, was excellent—a tomato consommé lightly tinctured with tawny port, a rack of lamb roasted slowly in soy sauce and vin rosé with small parsley potatoes and incredibly fresh miniature green peas, a salad and a

local pale cheddar cheese which Alan, Senior, claimed was unsurpassed by any of its more celebrated and more traveled cousins.

If there was one field of living in which Eleanor had benefitted from her association with the Herricks, it was in that of food. Her own family diet, like that of other old-line New England families, featured a "simplicity" that verged on total lack of flavor and imagination. The Herricks had been dining well since their New York ancestors imported their own wine in pipes from Funchal and yet remained lean and healthy as greyhounds.

Conversation was another art in which she had benefitted, though more in its enjoyment through listening than via her own voice. Throughout the meal, as during its preliminary daiquiri phase on the glassed-in porch overlooking the lake, Alan, Senior, conducted an easy monologue in which she was able to relax and enjoy without feeling forced to compete.

Although, by his own admission, he seldom strayed far from Lakeside, the incredibly young looking older man was astutely and well informed on subjects that ranged from inside Washington gossip to the condition of certain prized small vinyards on the sun and rainsoaked hillsides of Burgundy. Furthermore, he had an instinct for the right moment to pause and let mutual enjoyment be relished in silences that were never embarrassing, merely restful.

His son, Eleanor recalled, had possessed this same gift although she, herself, had never been able to acquire either the knack or the self-confidence on which it was based.

The Patons, all three of them, served as silently and impeccably as ever.

So why, she wondered as they adjourned to the big living

room where a fire crackled warmly in the great stone fireplace against the chill of the early autumn evening, did she feel uneasy, so close to the edge of fear?

Was it the turn-back-the-clock element, coupled with the still fantastic resemblance between live father and long-dead son? Was it her all too vivid remembrance of the daemonaic temper that lurked beneath the facade of easy amiability which had so enchanted her with both men? Was it the old house itself?

Early in their marriage, one wind-howling night, Alan had told her that Lakeside was haunted by the ghosts of more than one Herrick ancestor violently deceased . . .as it was of certain earlier colonists and Indians who had lived in the predecessors of the sandstone pseudo-Tuscan mansion—frame farmhouse, log cabin, wattle wickyup.

"I'll take you to the family burial ground," he had told her. "You can see for yourself."

It lay beyond a hedge, fenced in by cutback undergrowth less than seventy yards from the woven wood fence that guarded the kitchen area. There were some two-score headstones, ranging from the relatively new white granite pillar marking the grave of the woman who would have been Eleanor's mother-in-law had she lived, to centuries-old incised grey tablets in which early settlers had carved hideous likenesses of those who lay beneath the marks of their primitive masonry.

Like everything else in and about Lakeside, the graveyard was kept scrupulously neat, yet even at first sight Eleanor had found it depressing. The thought that she, too, might someday lie there, far from her family and friends, had given her an odd and unpleasant sense of rootlessness and inevitability.

Thereafter, when the old house creaked or sighed at night, she listened. Despite her no-nonsense heritage and upbringing, there were times when she had lain awake, trembling, fearful of the spirits of the long dead that surrounded her, whose presence she felt for all of her inability to accept their existence—while Alan, who accepted them as old friends and family, slept undisturbed by her side.

She had told no one of her fears lest she invite ridicule. At the time, she feared derision from the living far more than she feared avowal of the spectral plane.

Now, sitting by the fire with Alan, Senior, sipping fine Armagnac and growing increasingly

drowsy after her one-hundred and fifty mile drive from Boston, she was no longer sure which she feared the more. Yet she was definitely afraid.

She was almost relieved when Alan, Senior, finally brought up the matter that was on both their minds—the disposal of the house and grounds when the impending resort development deal went through.

He said, rotating his full bellied brandy inhaler slowly in his hands, "I shan't deny the selfishness of my concern, Eleanor. I had fondly hoped and believed that you would insist upon the house and its immediate surrounding acres remaining as we have known it, at least until my death."

Despairing of her ability to explain, she laid it out for him, saying, "Of course, I have tried—in fact, I am still trying. But the engineers and designers of the project insist that . . ." She went on to tell him of the engineering and projected cost-accounting demands of the huge promotion, which would turn this isolated area of New Hampshire into a super-exurbia, clear of all the growing horrors of city life yet with helicopter communication that would render daily travel to and from Boston and New York entirely feasible.

She explained what she had coaxed them to do in the way of supplying Alan Herrick and the Patons with comfortable, even luxurious, housing in lieu of their old estate.

She concluded, "The real nub of the problem, Alan, seems to be that this is the prize location of the entire area, one which must be turned to account as a sort of country-club marina-on-the-lake if the project is to succeed. Believe me, Alan, I have fought them to the last ditch."

"But you didn't need the money," he told her. "All you have to do to stop the desecrators is to refuse your signature."

"Once a thing like this is started," she said, "it's like trying to stop a bulldozer or a launched rocket."

"I wish you'd consulted me," he said, "before you let it get started. Perhaps then I could have persuaded you to put it off for a few years. After all, I am unlikely to be around forever."

What could she tell him—that it had been launched without her knowledge? This was literally the truth, but to admit such would be to make herself look an utter incompetent—and that she was not prepared to do. She had come back from a long trip abroad to discover the wheels already turning.

To stop it now would be impossible. For one thing, it would put too many persons out of work, even though the development corporation could well afford the losses involved.

He said, looking weary and old for the second time in her memory—the first was after his son's disappearance following the frantic fight of which she still knew next to nothing—"Well, sleep on it child. Perhaps, when you view Lakeside in the morning, you'll feel differently about ordering its execution. You have never been a hardhearted girl. At least, never before . . ."

He stopped it there, letting it hang. Although his voice had not risen, Eleanor could sense the full-bodied fury gathering behind it, the fury she had experienced but once before. His neck seemed to have thickened and his eyes recessed into tunnels from whose bottoms they gleamed brightly, wickedly, in the firelight.

SHE PROMISED to sleep upon it, said good night and left him sitting there. As she passed beyond the threshold of the fine old room, she heard the tinkle of glass behind her. Without looking, she knew Alan, Senior's, anger had caused him to crush the crystal inhaler he held cupped in his hands.

Oh, dear! she thought. *I hope he hasn't cut himself.*

Her human instinct was to turn back and offer help, but her experience of the Herrick temper was such that she knew it would be received as insult added to injury. Even *her* Alan reverted to such childishness when he lost his temper. Mercifully, he had never grown angry with her. But she had seen him explode twice in the brief course of their marriage—and both occasions were remembered with distaste.

The first such occasion had occured on the golf course. It had been the reaction to a succession of stupid mistakes by others, culminating when his caddy directed him to use a wrong club. This had resulted in his hitting an approach into a water hazard short of the green, which was masked by a rise in the ground from where Alan's ball lay.

When he saw the result of the faulty instruction, he had not said a word . . .but his neck and thickened and his eyes sunk unnaturally deep in his head. He had stood looking at the small pond in which his ball had vanished—then had picked up the boy bodily and tossed him into the water.

There had been reimbursement—the fit of fury had vanished as quickly as it had

come—and Alan had been sweetly apologetic to all concerned. But Eleanor had been disgusted by such childishness and had told him so when they reached the privacy of their room, concluding, "If you ever show violence again in my presence, I shall leave you—and that will break my heart, for I love you very much."

The second occasion occurred on what was to be the last evening of her husband's life. On that occasion, he had returned for dinner from a trip alone to the little town of Unity nearby. He had not stated the reason for his visit but, after dinner, father and son had retired to the study for what she presumed to be a private chat. Seated alone in front of the fireplace, she had heard the murmur of their conversation, lulling as the gentle flames in her ears.

Then there had been silence—a silence that for some reason disturbed her—and she had risen to seek its cause. In the study door, she had hesitated. Father and son were facing one another, glaring at one another with what she knew instinctively was mutual fury.

In choked, barely audible tones, she heard Alan, Senior, say, "So you see, you don't know what you've done, you fool."

In almost the same conversational tone, *her* Alan had replied, "You should have told me. Now there is something I must do."

"I must warn you—you idiot—that—" The father spoke to empty air as his son pivoted and left the room, walking blindly past Eleanor without seeing her and on out into the night.

It was the last she had ever seen of him, living or dead. The earth might have swallowed him up—or, as a coroner's jury had tentatively decided, the dangerous currents and bottomless holes of Birch Lake, just beyond the brim of the lawn.

Shortly after that, a lawyer from Unity had summoned her to tell her that, on the afternoon preceeding his disappearance, Alan Herrick, Junior, had willed all his earthly goods, including Lakeside and all it contained, to her. It was, she thought, almost as if he had known he was going to die, had known it in advance . . .

Oh, she—and they—had searched endlessly, had advertised, had hired tracers in a vain effort to discover what had become of Eleanor's husband. Finally convinced of his fate, Eleanor had removed herself from the house of so many now useless memories after a discreet interval during which she

and Alan Herrick, Senior, remained the polite strangers that, in actuality, they had always been.

As Eleanor reached the hall, she was moved by a sudden desire to step outside, to get a whiff of fresh air. The dinner sat heavy on her stomach, the airy old house seemed suddenly to close in on her. The need to fill her lungs with fresh country night air, untainted by smog or gasoline fumes, was urgent.

Instead of stepping out the front door, she chose the other route, around and under the staircase to the French windows that led to the flagged terrace overlooking the lake beyond the bluff.

The moon, near full, was ringed with clouds rendered white by its glow, but the light it gave enabled her to see where she was going.

As if directed by some unseen guide, she moved off the terrace, past the trellis that screened off the kitchen yard, to the gap in the row of tall slender trees that guarded the family burial ground.

She felt drawn by some unseen lodestone whose pull she could no more have resisted than she could have checked her own near-fall down the stairs unaided.

Thanks to the night darkness, she was unable to view the hideous caricatures on the older headstones, those grotesque incisions that made horror masks of what were presumably intended to be likenesses of the departed.

But the moonlight enabled her to see the white granite shaft that marked the final resting place of Alan's mother—and the new matching shaft that, she realized, must symbolize the grave of Alan, Junior—her Alan, whose body had never been recovered.

Confronting the fact of his death in such fashion, Eleanor felt its reality for the first time, like a sudden hard blow to the diaphragm. For long moments, she stood there breathless, mindless, aware only of the hard fact of his death, of the glossed over loneliness with which she had lived ever since.

When other awareness slowly returned, she felt that she was *not* alone—not physically alone, there in the graveyard. Some other presence had made itself felt through the numbness that had seized her senses.

Since she was not aware of having heard any actual sounds, she felt a sudden rush of hope—or was it fear?—that her husband's spirit had come back to join her from wherever it now was . . .

She stood there, still as a statue, holding her breath, wait-

ing for some further evidence of the existence of the other. When none came, she inhaled deeply, carefully, and slowly turned her head in the direction in which her instincts told her the presence lay.

The evidence she sought came swiftly with a rush of soft sounds beyond the barrier of trees that separated the graveyard from the immediate neighborhood of the old house. Whatever this was, Eleanor realized, it was no spirit, and she strode toward it. When she reached the gap in the trees, she was in time to see an orange and furry tail disappear around a corner of the woven wood trellis.

She wondered if the cat had it in for her—and why. And then, in the dew-damp grass just in front of her and to her left, she saw the faint imprint of a human shoe, limned indistinctly by the moonlight's angle.

Even as she looked, it faded as the moon itself slid behind a growing mass of clouds. Eleanor shivered and hastily retraced her steps back to the house . . .

In the upstairs hallway outside her room, Mrs. Paton, plump and matronly, was waiting for her. She was no longer smiling as she opened the bedroom door and stood back for Eleanor to enter. She stood on the threshold, apparently unable either to speak or to take her leave.

Wishing to be alone with her own thoughts, Eleanor said, "What is it, Verna? I promise I won't bite."

Verna Paton shuffled her feet, a ridiculous jiggle for a woman so butterball round. She gulped nervously, then said rapidly, "I just want you to be careful, Miss Eleanor. If you need help, it's in the drawer in the bedside table."

Then she was gone, after peering in both directions along the hall outside to make sure she had not been overheard. Eleanor stood looking after her, seeking an explanation of the absurd performance.

Since the solution, if indeed there was a solution, lay in the drawer of the fine old cherry-wood bedside table, she went to it, pulled the drawer open. There, lying on its side, was a small, snub-nosed revolver with every visible chamber loaded!

Although she had been

bone-tired before her encounter with Mrs. Paton, Eleanor discovered, once she lay down, that all trace of sleepiness had vanished. In place of a comfortably filled stomach and the added sleep-inducement of good brandy after dinner, she felt a nausea in the pit of her stomach and an unpleasant metallic taste at the base of her tongue.

For an instant, visions of Borgias danced in her head and she wondered fearfully if she might not have been poisoned. Certainly, she felt all the classic symptoms. By a great effort, she dragged herself out of the covers, across the well rugged floor, through the passage lined with clothes closets with sliding doors, to the old fashioned big bathroom beyond. There, she stuck a finger down her throat and made every effort to eliminate the toxic material she must have swallowed.

But she couldn't throw up. The food remained stubbornly in her stomach, try as she would to get rid of it. At length, having developed the added symptoms of trembling, weakness and intense cold sweats, she was forced to take the walk back to the bedroom and lie once more between the fine muslin sheets, now drenched with her perspiration.

Somewhere outside, beyond the open window, a loon uttered its jarring call. Eleanor jumped and trembled helplessly at the familiar noise before she recognized it—and, with recognition, devastating realization of what was wrong with her. For the first time in her usually sheltered life Eleanor Worden Herrick was feeling fear.

Apart from the inevitable minor panics of growing up and the nagging frights of adulthood, she had never before made the acquaintance of what Alan called the brass chills.

Having recognized the nature of her malaise, like any basically sensible person, she set about analyzing its origins to determine its proper treatment.

Its roots probably lay years back in the events preceeding Alan's disappearance from this very house—events alarming enough to have given rise to terror in a person more sensitive than herself.

Undoubtedly, Clara's behavior at luncheon and the unexpected appearance of the scarecrow "crucifix" had further primed her. Her former father-in-law's inexplicable cold rage had added its fuel and the final touches had been given by Verna Paton's curious warning and the revolver in her bedside table drawer.

Thus analyzed, her fear seemed foolish and she waited

for it to evaporate so that she could get some much needed sleep. She lay down and composed herself and, in her mind's eye, retraced a much loved woodland walk, a trick of recall that almost invariably left her in slumberland.

But this time, it didn't work —not quite. Just as she began to drift off, the loon uttered its cry again, and a hoot owl made a jarring chorus of it. Eleanor came instantly awake but tried again, resolutely determined to shut out all natural noises from her consciousness.

This time, however, it was the noises of the old house that caused her to forfeit slumber. Nor was it merely the usual nocturnal complaints of rheumatic joists and floorboards. Rather, it was a sense of living creatures rustling about, somehow always just out of earshot, or, worse, the rustling of creatures that lived no more. The graveyard ghost stories Alan had told her returned to the forefront of her memory with a rush.

Tired or not, Eleanor realized that she had had it where sleep was concerned, at least for the time being. She decided the only thing to do was to take a hot bath in the hope that a prolonged soak in the tub might relax her sufficiently to make a return to bed worth while. But as the creakings and rustlings continued around her, she wondered if bed were not the safest place for her to remain against the faceless mindless menaces her imagination had conjured up.

No, she decided, she was not going to be deterred. She set her chin and spirit resolutely against the idiocy of panic and, sliding her pajama clad legs over the edge of the big bed, took a deep breath.

Yet, when she walked toward the closet lined passage, the loaded pistol was in her right hand—and, when she reached the passage, all light was suddenly cut off as the door behind her was silently and swiftly closed . . .

III

EVEN IN that moment of ultimate terror, a thought of Clara and her lunch table premonitions flashed through Eleanor's mind. With a grim gallows humor she had never suspected she possessed, she thought, *Gerard, you're back on the beam* . . .

First the "crucifix", now the "tunnel of darkness"—one, two, button my shoe . . .

Somebody had turned off the lights and closed the door behind her. Somebody—or something. With that, the re-

volver in her hand felt as useless as Clara had predicted it would feel.

Strangely, the chill weakness of panic that had gripped her on the bed had faded before an adrenal surge that gave her a grip on herself. She thought, *I have this gun*, and she sensed that, sooner or later, her assailant, whatever its nature, must show itself.

Then she would shoot—or would she? And, if she shot, would she hit the target?

Eleanor was proficient at skeet shooting, but she had never in her life fired a hand gun. She had been told it was a lot more difficult to hit anything with a pistol, thanks to the shortness of its barrel and its lack of recoil mechanism.

Well, she thought, *I'll soon find out . . .*

She had been standing perfectly still, holding her breath, utterly undecided as to what to do.

There were three ways she could go, none of them exactly promising. She could feel her way back the way she had come, try to open the closed door and face her antagonist if it were still there. She could work her way onward through the "tunnel of darkness" until she reached the bathroom and there try the light switch. Or she could slide open one of the wardrobe closet doors and hide inside.

Eleanor decided upon the second course as the one her enemy would least expect her to follow. Moving slowly, carefully, silently, she took long seconds to cover the six feet that separated her from her goal. As she felt the door in front of her and found the knob and opened it, she welcomed the light that flowed dimly through the room's small, pebbled window.

After the Calcutta-hole darkness of the passage, it was like sunlight at high noon. Thanks to the adjustment of her eyes, she could make out the bowl, the toilet seat, the long rectangle of the tub and the stall shower beyond it without difficulty. She could even see the switch, within easy reach on the wall to her right.

Again, she hesitated. If she turned it on, she would become an easy target for anyone within range and armed. This, she told herself, was nonsense. If anyone were within range, he was in a position to dispose of her in such light as there was.

Taking another deep breath, she pressed the switch button—and the bathroom was flooded with light and utterly empty save for herself.

All at once, she felt utterly

idiotic standing there in her sweat-damp pajamas, holding the loaded pistol in her right hand. The whole evening became farcical rather than grisley. Squaring her shoulders, she marched back through the corridor, opened the bedroom door—and was greeted by the warm glow of the shaded lamp on the cherrywood bedside table.

She remembered, then, that Lakeside, like many another old dwelling built before electric lighting came into use, had frequent fusebox problems. Evidently, their condition had not been improved over the past seven years. As for the corridor door that had closed behind her, it could have resulted from a number of natural causes.

Yet not a trace of draft or breeze stirred the air of the room—nor could she remember feeling any since coming upstairs. Perhaps, she thought, the current of her own body passing through had made the door swing shut behind her. She retraced her steps, testing this hypothesis, but this time the door did not move.

Moving back into the bedroom, she finally decided that, if puzzling, it was not exactly grounds for renewed panic. She went back to the bed, realized that she was still holding the revolver, put it back in the night table drawer and closed it.

She told herself sharply that she had allowed herself to have a first class case of the old fashioned vapors, that she was going to take her bath and get back into bed and get the sleep she needed after a tiring day and evening. It was high time to set the spirits in the old house at rest—at least let them mind their own business.

Still, after closing the drawer upon the gun, she hesitated, again holding her breath, listening. She could have sworn she heard a noise. But, like the previous sounds she had heard, it remained tantalizingly out of earshot when she sought to fix it firmly.

I'm getting them again, she thought.

And then she heard them again . . .

This time, the sounds slowly became identifiable as human voices and movement. The voices grew louder, then ceased, but she heard definite sounds of footfalls in the hallway outside the room. They, too, grew louder as they approached the bedroom door, then halted, to be succeeded by a gentle knocking and her former father-in-law's voice saying, "Eleanor, are you all right?"

She said, finding to her surprise that her voice was quite steady, "I'm all right, Alan.

Why—is something the matter?"

"A little fusebox trouble," he replied, "Henry has fixed it. These damnable antique circuits! May I come in?"

She was puzzled but replied in the affirmative after slipping into the bed and covering her sweat-dark pajamas with the sheet. He entered, wearing a dark blue flannel robe over blue-and-white-striped pajamas, and she was shocked again by his likeness to his son, especially with his usually perfectly groomed hair tousled.

He said, "I hate to disturb you further, my dear, but since we are both up . . ."

All trace of anger had left him. His manner could not have been more charming as he stood by the bedside, hands buried in the pockets of his robe, looking down at her with a faint hint of apology in his raised left eyebrow.

She knew what it was, tried to make it easy for him. After all . . .

"I suppose it's the house," she said.

"One final plea. It means more to me than you have any idea of to live out my days here at Lakeside. I have had a document drawn up. With your signature, it will give me and the house life tenure."

"Alan," she said, feeling dreadful about it, "I hate to sound like a heartless monster, but it's too late. The contracts have already been signed and the parties concerned are merely awaiting word of my visit here to go ahead. What you ask is impossible."

Very quietly, he said, "Eleanor, nothing is really impossible. You could stop them."

"But I can't!" She all but wailed it. "And it's not my fault. It was Clara who got the whole thing launched while I was abroad. I didn't really understand what was happening until it was too late."

"*Clara!*" He all but spit the words.

"I don't blame you for being angry," she said, "and part of the responsibility is mine. I should have read the proposal more carefully. At the time, though, I was not too well."

His hands stirred in his robe pockets. He sucked in his breath, then said, "Sleep on it, my dear. I'll let you read the paper I have prepared in the morning. Perhaps by then you'll feel differently about destroying this fine old place."

"Perhaps." It was the best she could do to reassure him, even though it meant little. A few hours would hardly alter the situation Clara had brought down upon the old man. *Clara* . . .

As Alan, Senior, closed the hall door quietly behind him, Eleanor hugged her knees and pondered the paradox of her stepmother—a woman as hard headed as a steel bit, yet sufficiently sensitive to be in great demand as a medium.

You and your Gerard! Eleanor thought, uncoiling and lying down, managing to turn out the light just before slumber overcame her and she fell into a sound sleep . . .

WHEN SHE AWOKE, it was still pitch dark both outside and in the room. She lay there, while the tatters of sleep dissipated like shreds of cloud scattered by a sudden gust of wind. She had a distinct impression that someone—something—had awakened her and she lay perfectly still, waiting for some further sound.

It came, and this time there was no question but that it was a sound made by some alien agency—she heard the hall door shut softly and knew instantly that it was the sound of its being opened that had wakened her. Since her back was to the door, she could not try to see who the invader was without revealing herself to be awake . . .and she was not ready for that.

Mercifully, the bedside table with its loaded drawer was on her side of the bed, toward the tall windows that looked out at the night over the porch roof.

Then she heard the unmistakable creak of a floorboard complaining under the weight of a human foot. Then it came again and then was replaced by the softer sound of a footfall on the rug. Two more steps and whoever it was would be standing directly over the bed. It was time to do something . . .

Relying on speed and surprise rather than on stealth and concealment, Eleanor rolled from the window side of the bed and yanked the bedside table drawer open. Before she could clear the weapon, however, a tall dark form, shapeless in the darkness, dived across the bed toward her and a long bony hand reached for the weapon with long bony fingers.

For a long, agonized moment, she wrestled for the weapon against strength far greater than hers. At one instant she thought she was going to win as the opposing grip seemed to weaken—but then the hard edge of a hand came down on her wrists with sickening force and the revolver fell to the carpet.

So great was the pain, so helpless her condition, that for the first time in her adult life Eleanor screamed.

A hard thin hand gripped her shoulder, and she thought she

was done for—but her pajama top tore and she broke away, with her pursuer coming after her. Just as he grabbed her again, she tripped over the leg of a chair and fell head-long beside the bed, her arms outflung—to touch something hard and cold and of peculiar shape on the carpet under the edge of the bed.

It was the revolver Verna Paton had given her, and she gripped it like a drowning woman gripping an oar in the water. As she rolled over, holding it, her pursuer gave her a kick in the side that sent her tumbling and caused her shot to go wild. It also brought the one-sided contest to a brief halt in the very last possible instant.

Eleanor felt as if her right ribs had been stove in. She was sick to her stomach and her head was swimming. Only by the greatest of efforts was she able to retain consciousness. She could hear hoarse breathing close by and wondered if, by some miracle, she had actually hit her assailant.

No such luck. Instead, the revolver was snatched from her no-longer-resisting fingers by an accurate swoop of one bony hand, just as the other delivered a stunning blow to the side of the head that made the world scream like a police siren.

At that instant, the room seemed to blaze with light and, for an instant, Eleanor saw before her, in a long vertical rectangle of brightness, the image of her dead husband, standing upright and looking down at her with his handsome face suffused by anger and fear.

There was a hoarse cry from somewhere and the sound of a series of loud explosions as unconsciousness finally claimed her . . .

When she came to, she was lying in another bed, feeling battered, bruised and achingly sore all over. Sunlight streamed in through other windows in the old house, giving a magnificent view of the far shore of the lake in the full scarlet and yellow brilliance of its early autumn foliage.

She discovered that she was naked from the waist up, with canons of modesty offered via the corset of plastic bandages that covered her chest and right side.

She also discovered that Clara was seated in a chair by the windows with a huge cup of coffee on a small table at her elbow, regarding her stepdaughter through a cloud of pale blue cigarette smoke. Eleanor was never quite so glad to see Clara in her life.

Noting that she was awake, the older woman said, "I won't ask you how you feel if you

won't ask me what happened."

Eleanor managed a sawdust smile and said, "I feel lousy, so do your stuff."

"You took a hell of a beating," said Clara.

"Who did it?" Eleanor asked and knew the answer even as she spoke.

"Henry Paton," said Clara. "What a tough old buzzard! It took both policeman to get him in hand."

"Alan," said Eleanor as memory came flooding back. "Is he all right? I heard shots just after I saw him."

"Whichever Alan you mean," said Clara matter-of-factly. "I'm afraid they're both dead. *Your* Alan seven years ago as we thought, old Alan last night. You mustn't feel too badly, though. He died saving your life. If he hadn't waded into Old Henry's pistol, you'd have been dead before I could get up there with the cops."

She paused, then continued. "Yesterday afternoon, I kept getting worse vibrations from Gerard, until finally he told me to come up here after you. Well, I had generator trouble outside of Portsmouth, and the communications got worse and worse. I got hold of the police, thanks to Gerard, and we only just made it."

"Was Henry Paton insane?" Eleanor asked. She was still, mercifully, too numb to feel shock or grief over that Clara had just told her about her husband and about her former father-in-law. That would come later. For now, though, she had to know.

"Not so you'd notice it," said Clara, "unless all murderers are lunatics. Incidentally, it was Henry who did your Alan in. You see, he helped cover up the fact that old Alan killed his wife in one of his famous rages—the last time he ever let go and got violent. That left the Patons with a nice cushy spot for life working the estate reinforced by the hold they had over the old man."

Eleanor said, "Alan's mother must have been afraid his father would kill her or something. That must have been why she left the estate to her son. It was the evening after he made a will leaving it to me that he disappeared." A pause, then, "So Old Henry killed him then. How do you know all this?"

"Your father-in-law talked before he died—he left you his love and regrets by the way—and they dug up the bodies in the graveyard. Oh, it all checks out."

"I suppose the bodies in the graveyard were the reason Alan, Senior, was so dead against the development project."

"Right," said Clara. "I

thought their attitude was unreasonable from the start, so I've been doing a little research on the sly—and, may I add, not liking what I found. That was why I did my best to keep you from coming up here yesterday—not, at least, until we had proved out our suspicions about something being very rotten in this particular Denmark."

"But Clara," said Eleanor, "you must know you talked me right into it."

"And into a couple of broken ribs, as well," said Clara, wrinkling her nose in disgust. "I should have known better than to use that approach, but Gerard sometimes has ideas of his own. I know how stubborn you Wordens can be. I ought to. I was married to your father as you may recall now and then."

"It's all right, Clara." In that moment, Eleanor felt a warmth toward her hard-headed stepmother she had never felt before—a warmth and some small understanding of the sensitivities and loyalties that underlay the walnut-hard shell of her personality.

"Tell me," said Clara, "how did Gerard's predictions pan out?"

"Don't you know?" Eleanor countered.

The two women looked long into each other's eyes and then Clara half-smiled and said, "Perhaps I do at that." She rose, added, "It's been a long hard night. I'm going downstairs and make some more coffee. How about you?"

"Sounds fine," said Eleanor.

But when Clara returned with a laden tray, the young widow was fast asleep . . .

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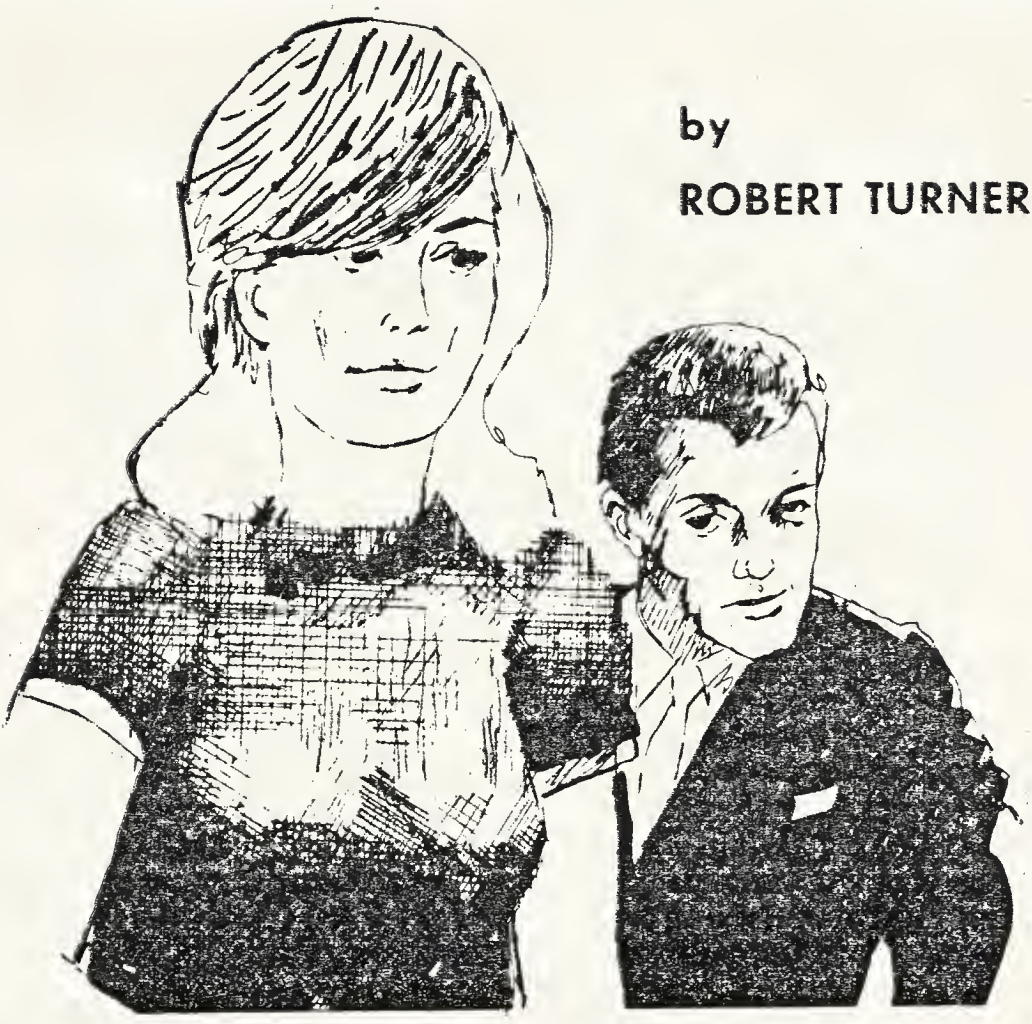

by

ROBERT TURNER

THE CATNIP CAPER

He had stolen my wife, my future, my life. Now he would pay for it—my way.

LEN MASON got the idea that lazy summer afternoon when his wife, Gracie, brought home a box of catnip as a special treat for Hugo, her big black cat. He watched curiously as she spooned some of the stuff into Hugo's eating dish.

"What does it do for him, Gracie?" Len asked.

She shrugged. "I don't know, really. I mean, I guess it

just makes him feel good." She laughed lightly. "It sort of makes him a little high, would be the best way to describe it. Haven't you ever seen a cat after he's had it?"

He shook his head. "Uh-uh."

"You watch," she said. "It's really funny to watch."

Hugo sniffed at the small pile of what looked like powdery chaff and then began to lick it up. He moved away after the catnip was half-consumed, shaking his head violently. With little leg-shaking leaps, Hugo then galloped out into the living room. Len and Gracie followed.

There, the cat began to wash his face with a paw. Every once in a while he glanced around with a glassy stare. Then, suddenly, he began to roll over and over, back and forth across the rug. Next he got up and ran around in a circle, performing small leaps into the air. Then he again went back to crazily rolling around on the rug.

"See!" Gracie cried, delightedly. "He's really having a good time, isn't he?"

"Yeah," Lennie said. His deep blue eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "He sure acts like he's stoned. I wonder what's in that stuff. Must be some kind of dope or something. I mean, at least it affects cats that way."

Suddenly, he turned and went out into the kitchen. He returned a moment later, carrying the box of catnip. He began reading from the label.

"Listen to this. It says: 'A fine blend of catnip leaves, blossoms and stems. Its stimulating effects will promote ideal exercise and enjoyment for your cat. . .' "

He poured some of the tiny light brown dried twigs and sprigs onto the palm of his hand, raised them to his nose and sniffed. He shook his head. "No odor to it."

"What does that mean?" Gracie asked.

He ignored the question. "Stimulating effects, the label said but really doesn't tell you what the ingredients are. What *is* catnip, anyhow? Let's check it out."

The encyclopedia called it: 'Catmint or catnip, common names for a hardy perennial herb, *Nepeta Cataria*, of the mint family. It is a native of Europe but a common weed in North America. Its sharp fragrance is attractive and exciting to cats."

"Uh-huh," Len said. "Marijuana's a common weed, too. Maybe I've got something here."

He left the room and returned a few minutes later, carrying the catnip box in one hand and a packet of Zigzag

cigarette papers in the other. He sat down at the cocktail table, poured some of the catnip onto a cigarette paper, then expertly rolled it, licked the glued edge to seal it into a tube and twisted the ends.

"What on earth are you doing, Len?" Grace asked, frowning. "You're not going to smoke that stuff!"

He showed her his slightly crooked, boyish grin. "Why not? It can't kill me."

He stuck the tube into his mouth, struck a match and applied the flame to the other end of it. He pulled a deep draft of dry tasting smoke and expelled it. He thrust his face into the cloud of smoke, sniffing deeply. Then he stared wonderingly at the smoking tube in his hand.

"Far out!" he said. "Smell that! It smells exactly like weed."

"Like what, Len?"

"Like grass. Pot. Marijuana. Can't you smell it?"

He took another drag and blew the smoke at her. She sniffed and nodded. "Yes. Yes, I suppose it does at that. But so what?"

"So this. I couldn't tell the difference. That means neither could anybody else. Like, I mean, even The Man would think it was weed being smoked in here, if he came in."

"What man, Len?"

"Oh, come on, Gracie. The Law. The cops."

He took another drag and inhaled it deeply, sucking in air along with the acrid smoke. He shook his head, marveling. "It even tastes like grass. It could fool me. Now let's see if it has the same effect."

After several more puffs, Len snubbed out the catnip cigarette into an ashtray.

"Nothing," he said. "Well, maybe a slight hit but that might just be my imagination."

Gracie clucked her tongue impatiently, her sweetly pretty face frowning a little. "I just don't know what you're getting at, what this is all about."

"I'm not too sure, myself," he told her. "For one thing, I had a crazy notion that catnip might contain marijuana, but now I doubt it. However, tomorrow I'm going to the county seat at Midburg and have a lab check it out."

"For what?"

"To make sure the stuff doesn't contain any type of narcotic and is strictly legal to possess."

"But what on earth for?"

He gave her an enigmatic smile. "We'll see, baby. It just may be that I've figured out a way to get back at that lousy hick town constable of ours for busting me a couple of weeks ago. And picking up a big

chunk of money at the same time."

"Oh, Len," she said. "Why don't you just forget about all that. Why keep brooding about it? It wasn't really Constable Bisby's fault. He was just doing his job. You knew it's illegal to possess marijuana. I don't see how you can blame Jim for arresting you when he caught you breaking the law, right out and out and no two ways about it."

"Oh, sure," Len said. "Just doing his job, doing his job," he parroted. "Only, I thought he was supposed to be a friend of ours. You even went to school with him. Well, I mean, I guess I knew he was no friend of mine, really. I could tell the way he sometimes looked at me that he figured I was just a no-good bum, living off of his wife. Well, maybe so. But that's a lot smarter than being a two-bit hick lawman. Especially when he's independently wealthy and doesn't have to hold down a stupid job like that."

"Well, it keeps him busy," Gracie said. "And Jim likes law work."

"Oh, I'll bet he does!"

"That's not fair, Len. You know he seldom has to make any arrests. And someone has to keep peace in the town."

"Yeah. Well, I wasn't breaking any peace and he busted me. I'm just driving along, minding my own business, having myself a small weed to relax and what happens? Big Joe Law stops me, he says, to tell me my rear license plate is hanging loose. Then he smells the smoke in the car, discovers the roach I'd stepped on. Hell, I figured he was so dumb he wouldn't even know what the smell was. But, oh no, on something like that he's got to be smart!"

"Please, Len," she said. "I've heard all this. Why do you have to keep bringing it up?"

"Because I'm the one it happened to, dammit. It's important to me. I'm the one who spent two nights in that stinking county jail before you bailed me out. I was lucky I drew a fine and suspended sentence, instead of time in the pen. Just because that Tooner-ville-type judge said he felt sorry for you and thought it was about time I started supporting you for a change and made one of the conditions that I get a job and keep it."

"Supporting me, Len? On the sixty dollars a week that you make at the gas station? When you spend most of it on liquor and get drunk every night?"

He waved his hand. "What do you want me to do? Go nuts with boredom? I don't dare take a chance on smoking pot

any more. And after pumping gas for a bunch of small town idiots all day, I got to do something for relaxation, don't I?"

"Well, we—we could play Canasta or Quinto or Monopoly, Len, like we used to all the time. Or even have some of our friends in once in a while."

"Oh sure, Gracie. Way out! What kicks! Only I got sick of Canasta and Quinto and Monopoly. And your damned stupid friends. Your friends, not mine. Me, I'm an outsider in this hokey little town, always have been. They all think I'm putting them down because I've got a few brains, a decent education and haven't spent all my life in Yahoo County. Plus the fact they all think I married you only because you have a nice little piece of property here and a comfortable fixed income the rest of your life from your mother's estate."

Her eyes, big and brown and gentle, looked squarely into his.

"Well, didn't you, Len?" she asked softly.

"Didn't I what?"

"Marry me because of that."

"Oh, come off it, Gracie. If I wanted to marry somebody for their money, it wouldn't be some little broad with a house in a small town and five hundred a month income. That's peanuts. I'm a big, good-looking

guy and if that's what I wanted, I could have found some rich little old lady with a few hundred thousand, at least."

He walked over to her, put his hand up under the smooth brown fall of her hair.

"Come on, baby," he whispered. "This doesn't sound like you. You know I've been crazy about you from the first moment we met. Before I even knew you had a nickel. Look, what are we quarreling about? Just because I said I wanted to get even with Bisby? What's wrong with that?"

She edged away from him, ducking under his hand. "I just don't want any more trouble, that's all. What's over is over."

"Not always. Anyhow, my idea might not check out, so we'll skip it for a while, anyhow. Okay?"

It did check out, though. The sample Len took to a test-

ing laboratory in the county seat the next day was certified to be nothing more than common catnip, to be found on the shelves of any market and absolutely did not have any illegal drug content.

Driving back, Len was jubilant, began working on the details of his plan. That night he explained the whole thing to Gracie. When he finished he said: "What do you think?"

"I think it's a terrible thing to do to that poor man," she said. "Deliberately misleading him into arresting you again on a marijuana charge and then when the stuff turns out to be nothing but catnip, suing him for false arrest."

"That poor man?" Len repeated. "That big dumb honky of a cop, you mean! How can you feel sorry for him? So I sue for a hundred grand and maybe I'll get awarded ten or fifteen. He's worth a hell of a lot more than that, I understand. He can afford it. And if he loses his job, so what?"

"Well, I just don't think it's fair."

"Yeah, well maybe this will change your mind. Remember I promised you that one day I'd take you on a nice long vacation trip to Europe, to all the places you like to read about?"

She nodded, said resignedly: "Yes, I remember, Len. When you asked me to marry you. You said you had an idea for a great novel and married to me, with no financial problems, you could finally get to writing it. And I was naive enough to believe you. And when the book made a lot of money, you said, we'd take that trip. Yes, I remember. Only we've been married for two years now, Len, and you haven't written line one. I don't think you ever will."

"Okay, okay," he said. "So I've been putting it off. Only I am going to do it. As soon as we get back from that trip. That's what'll really do the trick for me, seeing all those exotic places, the different ways of life. A writer needs to travel. And you'll be there, sharing it all with me. It'll be good for you, too. You need to get away from this house, this crummy little town, for a while."

"Not really, Len. I'm not like you. I like it here. I was born and raised here and I'll probably spend the rest of my life here. Maybe I'm just a dumb small town girl but I'm not ashamed of it."

"Of course not. But that doesn't mean you couldn't enjoy a nice trip like that."

"Maybe it does, if it's at the expense of someone I know and

like, someone like Jim Bisby, who's been a good friend all my life and in fact a man I once considered marrying."

"Yeah, yeah," Len said. "You told me all about that, how if you didn't have to take care of your sick mother, you might have married him. You also told me that it was just a crush and that you probably weren't really in love with him."

She sighed. "I guess so. I've often wondered, though, why he hasn't married somebody else. I'm sure he's had the chance; he's not bad-looking and he's kind and good. He would make a good husband for somebody."

"Yeah and bore 'em to death. You'd go crazy after a month of being married to that meathead. One thing you can say about me, baby; I've never bored you."

"I guess that's true, Len. You've only made me sad." She looked at him thoughtfully.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, I hate to see a man waste his life. You're good-looking and intelligent, Len, and likeable—when you want to be. You could have made something of yourself."

"I still can," he said. "All I need is a break. And if I can nail Bisby for a big chunk of bread, maybe that'll be the break I've needed."

"You're really going to go through with it, aren't you, Len? You've made up your mind."

"You're damned right."

"Well, you can count me out. I won't have any part of it."

"You don't have to. You won't even be in the house. You'll split before it happens. So don't worry about being involved."

She didn't answer. She just shook her head wearily and got up and walked out of the room.

Alone, Len went over the plan in his mind once more. At the same time he told himself that Gracie didn't have to worry about taking any trip to Europe. In the first place, he wasn't going. When the court awarded him a nice settlement from Bisby, he was going to leave this town and Gracie, far behind.

He didn't yet know where he would go. It didn't matter. He only knew that he'd had it up to here with the town and with her. Who needed her any more, once he had a big chunk of cash? She'd changed in the past six months or so. She was less and less the sweet, loving wife she'd been at first. She was moody a lot and often cold and too critical.

One time when they had a big fight, she'd even mentioned something about a divorce but he'd put her down fast on that one. He'd asked her what grounds she would use? He didn't fool around with other women, he didn't beat her; she'd married him, knowing she would have to support him while he worked on his book and just because he hadn't yet gotten around to doing that, didn't really mean anything. And that was the end of that. She never brought the subject up again.

When this was all over and he was gone, he couldn't care less what she did. Let her get her divorce then, if she wanted to. In the meanwhile—and the false arrest suit could take quite a long time—he still had a good meal ticket.

Two nights later, Len Mason put his plan into effect. Everything went smoothly. He rolled seven catnip cigarettes while Gracie watched him with a sort of moody fascination. A few minutes later, he sent her off to the local movie theater. Next, he smoked two of the cigarettes, walking about the room to make sure the smoke was well distributed. He had already shut all the windows and front door. Then he made his phone call to Constable Bisby's office.

Holding a handkerchief over the mouthpiece and speaking nasally, to disguise his voice, he said:

"Bisby, this is a neighbor of Len Mason's. I have reason to believe that rotten no-good is smoking that filthy weed again—and right in his wife's house this time, while the poor woman is out, somewhere. Isn't that illegal?"

"What makes you think that's what he's doing?" Bisby asked.

"Well, I saw his wife leave and then he shut the front door and all the windows. Why else would he do that on a hot summer night. I think you ought to look into it."

"Perhaps you're right. I'll check it out."

Mason hung up and then lit another cigarette, blowing the smoke about the room. He was just about to snub out the butt when there was a knock on the door. He pushed the butt into an ashtray, leaving it smouldering there and went and opened the door.

Constable Jim Bisby and his young deputy, Art Chisolm, were standing there, both of them looking grim. They sniffed the smoke-laden air drifting out and glanced at each other knowingly.

"Mason," Bisby said. "We'd like to come in and talk with you."

"Well, uh—couldn't you make it later? I—I'm very busy right now."

Bisby shook his head. "Right now, Mason. We have good reason to believe you're breaking the law and we have a right to investigate. Move out of the way. We're coming in."

He moved aside and they pushed past, into the house. Bisby moved toward the cocktail table on which stood the ashtray containing butts of the three cigarettes Mason had smoked and next to it, the rolled, yellow-papered tubes of four more, still unsmoked.

"Let me have that envelope, Chisolm," he said.

The young deputy took a folded Manila envelope from his hip pocket and passed it to the Constable. Bisby dumped the contents of the ashtray into the envelope, picked up the four unsmoked tubes and put them into the envelope, too. He then sealed it and handed the envelope back to Chisolm. Turning to Len he said, his round, good-looking face solemn:

"Leonard Mason, I herewith place you under arrest, charged with the use and possession of illegal drugs. You have the right to remain silent until you obtain counsel. Now, please come with us."

Len Mason shook his head. "I don't believe it," he said.

"Your doing this to me. I wasn't hurting anybody. What's the point?"

"The point is, I'm an officer of the law. I have a duty to perform, regardless of who's involved. I can't much feel sorry for you, Mason. You were warned that this kind of thing won't be tolerated in this town. We're a clean town. Now, come along."

With the one phone call he was allowed to make, Len Mason talked with Mark Cantrell, Gracie's attorney. He told Cantrell what had happened but that Gracie needn't bother to bail him out, that he'd be free in a day or two, anyhow, as soon as the lab reports on the evidence Bisby had picked up, were returned.

"How's that?" Cantrell asked.

"I mean, they got me on a bum rap. There wasn't any marijuana. Just catnip, Cantrell. You hear that? Simple, harmless catnip. It looks and smells, when burning, like the real stuff."

"Really?" Cantrell said, surprised. "I didn't know that."

Len chuckled. "Nor do a lot of people, including Bisby and Chisolm. But they're about to find out, the hard way."

"Did you tell them that's what it was?" Cantrell asked.

"Why should I? They didn't ask me. They assumed I was guilty of committing a crime and arrested me. They probably wouldn't have believed me, anyhow. Bad enough being busted without seeming to be a fool, too."

"I see. Well, I'll check out the lab reports as soon as they come in and if what you say is true, we'll have you out of there fast."

"Great," Len said. "See you later."

He settled back to wait.

The morning after the next day, Cantrell visited Len Mason at the County Jail. He was a stodgy little man with a pursed mouth and cold gray eyes. Abruptly he said: "Those lab reports came in."

"Beautiful," Len said. "When do I get out?"

Cantrell drew in a deep breath. "Probably not for a long, long time. Second offense and all that."

"What—what do you mean, man? Are you crazy? What second offense?"

"Possession."

Len gave an hysterical laugh. "Of catnip?! You've got to be kidding!"

"No. Of marijuana. Two unsmoked cigarettes and one of the butts contained the stuff. The others were nothing but catnip but that makes no difference. The three genuine ones

are enough to make the charge stick."

"But that's impossible Something's wrong. I rolled those damned things, myself. There was nothing but catnip in any of them. Look, I'm being framed. That damned hick cop must have suspected something and switched in some real joints, just to nail me. They can't get away with this!"

Cantrell shrugged his stooped shoulders. "That's highly unlikely. The sworn testimony of Constable Bisby, as witnessed by his deputy, Chisolm, is that the envelope was filled and sealed at your house and not opened again until delivered to the lab at the County Center.

"Then somebody at the lab got things screwed up," Mason shouted. "It has to be." He felt his face getting red, his voice choking up.

"Also highly unlikely. They don't make mistakes like that. I'm afraid you're stuck with it, Mason."

Len shook his head unbelievingly. "This is insane! Why would I be smoking catnip when I had the real thing right there if it was? It doesn't make sense."

"Constable Bisby thinks so. He thinks you were probably making comparisons to see if the catnip, in addition to smelling like marijuana, might also give you a high that would be legal."

Mason put his face in his hands. "Oh no," he said. "Oh no!"

"There's one other thing, Mason," Cantrell said. "Gracie asked me to give you a message. She said to tell you that she's very sorry for you but there's nothing she can do to help."

"The hell there isn't," Mason told him, shrilly. "She can get me out on bond so I can try to straighten out this crazy mess, myself."

Cantrell shook his head. "She's not going to do that. She doesn't want to see you any more. She's asked me to start divorce proceedings against you."

"Divorce? Oh, for God's sake, Cantrell! On what grounds?"

"You will soon be a convicted felon, under sentence. We think that's quite grounds enough. I have to go now, Mason."

Len stared speechless after the little attorney as he got up and walked out of the interview room.

Back in his cell, Len Mason found himself trembling with rage, mixed with fear and bewilderment. He recalled now that after he was arrested by Bisby, he had felt a little stoned

but had put it down to exultation at how well his plan was working. Could it really be that one of those tubes he'd smoked was marijuana? If so, how had it and the other two genuine joints been substituted for the catnip ones? If Bisby and Chisolm hadn't made the substitution after they left—and why should they, not knowing that he was putting a frame on them—then somebody else had before they came! And only Gracie knew . . .

Oh no, he told himself. It couldn't be. Not Gracie! Yet he remembered now that after he'd rolled the catnip, he'd gone to the bathroom. Right then and there Gracie would have had plenty of time to substitute real joints.

But where would she get them? She wouldn't even know how to roll a joint as well as he did.

Then it came to him. Bisby, as a law officer, could obtain the stuff if he wanted to. With a little practice he could learn how to roll properly. He could have made those joints and given them to Gracie to substitute for the catnip ones, when she had the opportunity.

This could only mean that after Mason told her what he was going to do, she'd gone to Bisby and told him the whole thing. Between the two of them, then, they'd figured this way to doublecross him.

But why?

Could she have been waiting for some solid, legitimate reason to divorce him? And maybe planning, later, to marry her old boy friend, Bisby?

Half aloud, he told himself: "But she couldn't do something like this to me!"

Then he wondered silently: Or could she?

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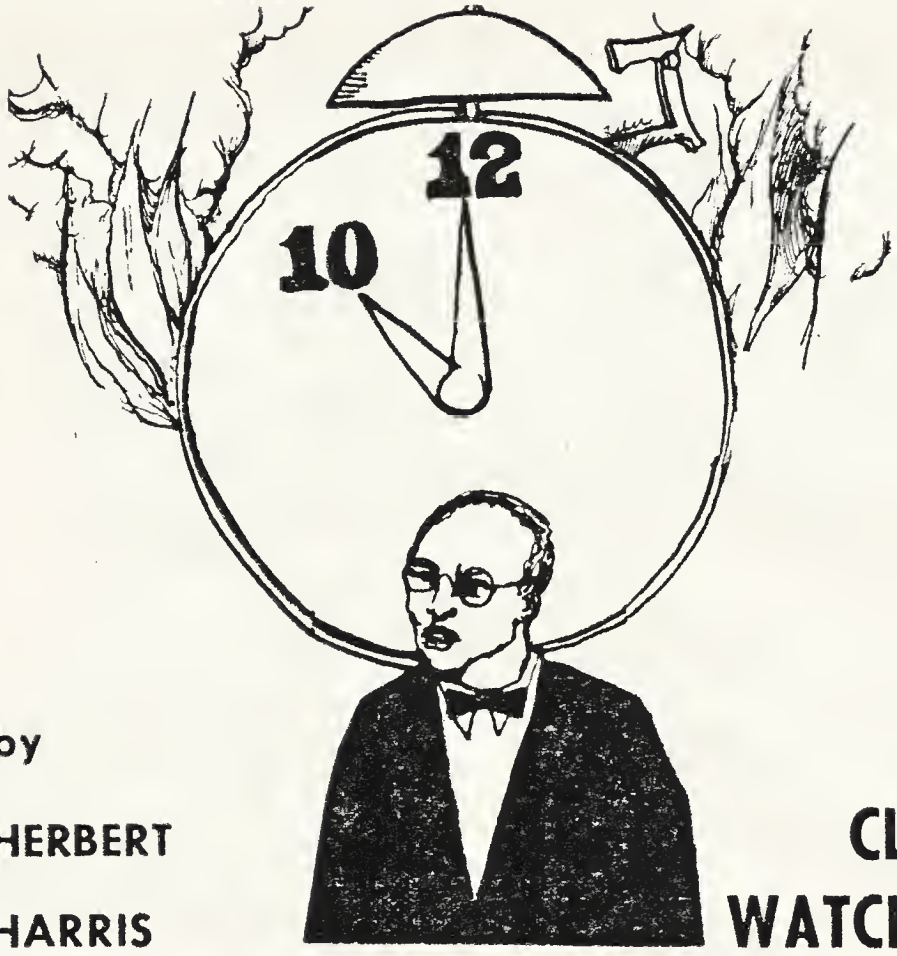

by HERBERT HARRIS

THE CLOCK WATCHERS

Three minutes they had given him to cause a murderer to face the gallows. Could he use them to good effect?

EVEN IF Charles Dainby had not been a psychologist, he would have known that Norman Sellor had poisoned his aunt, Mrs. Freedel.

Sellor had the brand marks of greed, rottenness, a heart without mercy.

Dainby had said to the girl he hoped to marry, old Mrs Freedel's secretary-companion "You know, Janet, they were right to arrest the old lady's nephew. He was desperately in need of the legacy. He poisoned his aunt all right." He shook his head knowingly.

Janet had nodded, fighting

back her tears. "I know. I'm quite sure he did it too."

"You were fond of old Mrs. Freedel?"

"Yes. She was so kind and trusting. She trusted Norman. He's not going to get away with it, is he?"

Dainby looked grim. "The defence has the weakest possible case. They can only argue on trivial technicalities. Not that these aren't important sometimes."

It had taken Norman Sellor three minutes—the three minutes he had spent alone with the frail old lady in her room—to mix that fatal dose of barbiturate.

Sellor hadn't known that Charles Dainby—calling for Janet, who happened to be out—was in the house, had seen him go into Mrs. Freedel's room and emerge a little later.

Sellor had not quite concealed his shock at seeing Dainby, his momentary flush of guilt And there had been that lame attempt to divert the suspicion which he knew would shortly come winging inevitably in his direction

"Just looked in on the old girl. She swallowed some of her pills and went straight off. I was only in there a minute."

At least three minutes. This was the unshakable fact—but only *he*, Dainby, knew it.

Alfred Bittner, counsel defending Sellor, rose with aggressive determination—a big man, in love with histrionic effect.

Bittner knew that the case for the defence was as flimsy as tissue paper, that microscopic detail had to be magnified into dramatic proportions.

"Mr. Dainby, you have told the court that the accused was in his aunt's room for three minutes?"

"Perhaps a little more. But about three minutes."

"*About* three minutes?" Counsel, wearing a malevolent smile, studiously flicked back his gown. "You didn't time it by your watch, then?"

"No."

"Mr. Sellor has stated emphatically he was in that room for so short a time that he could not possibly have done what he is accused of doing—one minute, in fact."

"I'm sorry to say he is lying," said Dainby.

"But you could have been mistaken in your assessment of the time? When you are waiting for your young lady, time crawls by slowly, does it not?"

"I'm saying he was in the room for three minutes."

"Are you seriously telling us, Mr. Dainby, that you can gauge the difference between a minute, or two minutes, or three minutes?"

"I think so, yes."

"You are a sort of human egg-timer?"

Dainby allowed himself a faint smile as the court tittered.

The defending counsel spun round to face the judge. "With your lordship's permission, I should like to test this witness's ability to make accurate assessments of time."

Counsel for the prosecution interjected: "My learned friend appears to be wasting it!"

The judge stared impassively at the Crown's representative, a somewhat impudently complacent man. "Perhaps you will allow *me* to be the best judge of whether the defence is presenting its case in the proper manner."

"My most humble apologies, my lord."

The judge, tight-lipped, addressed Alfred Bittner: "Kindly proceed with the experiment you have in mind."

The defence counsel bowed. "Thank you, my lord." He turned to the witness, conscious of the tiny glow of triumph inside him, of the rapt interest of the jury.

"On the wall behind you, Mr. Dainby, is a large clock—visible to the members of the jury but not to yourself.

"Would you be so kind as to place your left hand behind your back, so that you cannot consult your watch, and indicate by raising your right hand when you consider that three minutes have elapsed."

The judge put in: "One must consider the possibility of the witness counting the seconds. I suggest, therefore, that after giving your signal for witness to commence, you continue with other questions you may wish to put in your cross-examination."

"As your lordship pleases." Alfred Bittner faced the man in the witness box. "Perhaps you will kindly indicate when three minutes have elapsed, beginning *now*." He raised his hand.

"In the meantime, Mr. Dainby, would you be good enough to tell us what else the accused said to you after you had seen him emerge from his aunt's room?"

There was an oppressive, expectant hush in the court, save for the drone of the question and answers of the two principal players now holding the stage. The seconds and minutes passed with the slowness of a paralytic centipede.

At length, in the middle of a complicated question, Dainby raised his hand and said quietly: "The three minutes are up."

The counsel for the defence glanced at the clock and scowled. He caught the eye of Charles Dainby, who sat, arms

folded, smiling at him, saying with malicious eyes: *"Hoist with your own petard, I think."*

The room was still.

The judge, studying the large pocket watch which lay in front of him, had made it three minutes exactly. He looked at defending counsel. "Have you completed your cross-examination of this witness?"

Alfred Bittner crossly adjusted his wig. "Yes, m'lud."

AFTERWARDS, to Janet, Dainby said: "When I used the term 'about three minutes,' I meant just that—*about* three minutes. I don't profess to be a human egg-timer, as that lawyer put it."

"But if you aren't how did you do it? By counting or something?"

She allowed herself a smile, her first real smile for weeks. Sellor had been tried, found guilty, and the terrible strain of the questioning and the trial was past.

"Counting?" Dainby returned her smile. "Have you tried to count while questions are fired at you? No. I'll let you into a small secret . . .About a little experiment in psychology—which you might expect from a psychologist."

"The jury could see the clock but I couldn't. And the jury *watched* the clock. One had only to study their eyes."

"You see, darling . . .when they stopped looking at the clock and looked at *me*, they were telling me—just as if they had shouted it—that the three minutes were up "

In the MARCH Issue

THE EVIL CIRCLE OF ABE RELES

A New TRUE CRIME Masterpiece

by DAVID MAZROFF

"Kid Twist" was his nickname, but when Abe Reles twisted towards the side of the law, his playmates forgot to laugh. The men of Murder, Inc. preferred their friends to stay silent, and when Reles started to sing they decided to teach the canary a lesson: he might sing, but he couldn't fly, not even a locked cage could protect him.

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Please print **FEBRUARY, 1974**

A Novelet That Will Fracture You—Almost!

THREE FOR THE MONEY

by LOUIS RILEY

IT WAS A balmy Sunday night, and Big Lefty, Little Manuel and I were sitting in the back room of Solemn Sol's bar and grill, drinking double hookers and speculating on what to do next—whether to go over to Madam Chang's for a little disportation, as the licentious Little Manuel had suggested, or go see if we could slip in and sandbag Chippy Parkington's eternal crap game.

While we were taking a vote, there came a discreet tapping at the door and Solemn Sol himself stuck in his shiny bald head to announce:

"You boys have got company."

Big Lefty jerked his massive head up and glowered at Solemn Sol.

"What company already, baldy?"

The fat, basset-eyed proprietor winced and almost recoiled from the big man's menacing look, and I can't say I blame him.

You have to see this Big Lefty to believe him. He is an ugly, scar-faced semi-Indian giant. Nobody—and I do mean nobody—could be more meaner and evil in appearance than he is. This boy could scare the snakes off Medusa's head just in passing by.

Recovering a little, Solemn Sol said: "Dixie Dan Shivers and The Dummy are here to see you fellows."

"Big Lefty lit a long, strong black cigar and expelled a pungent cloud of acrid smoke at the cracked ceiling. He cocked a shaggy brow at Solemn Sol and asked: "What do those bums want?"

The owner shrugged. "They didn't say. All they told me was that they wished a meet with you."

There was a bushel of loot in that cracker box safe, just crying for three smart guys like us to take it away. All it needed was two murders, a triple-cross—and five grand we didn't have.

Big Lefty sighed. "All right, Sol," he said. "Show the schmucks in. I ain't had a good laugh in quite a while."

Solemn Sol nodded and shut the door. The slick-haired Little Manuel took a snort of Bourbon, leaned back in his chair and said: "Now I wonder what those petty larcenists want."

We didn't have to wait long to find out, for a moment later Solemn Sol re-opened the door and ushered the disreputable pair in. Dixie Dan Shivers was taller than me, indeed, almost as high as the towering Big Lefty. Prematurely gray, lean and gaunt looking, he sported two prominent front teeth that gave him an hyenic appearance when he spoke, laughed or even smiled. The Dummy, on the other hand, was of average height and bore practically nondescript features. This man could hear, but could not speak save for some incoherent garbling sound he made from his throat whenever he became excited. Some time back he had managed to get his tongue sliced out by a disgruntled fellow convict in the federal pen at Leavenworth. Snitching, I believe they called it.

The three of us sat quite still, politely ignoring Dixie Dan's outstretched hand, then he awkwardly replaced it at his side. Mustering up an ingratiating smile, he said: "Well, h'ra, boys? Haha! You all look like you been eating high on the ribs, these days. Haha!"

Big Lefty sneered. "We eat," he said laconically.

"Yeah," I put in. "We eat. What's on your mind, Dixie? I know you didn't come around here just to comment on our dining habits."

"Haha! You're right, Lucky. Haha! Dining habits. Haha! well, I'll get right to the point, then, and get it over with, Haha! Ahh—umm—er—"

"Well?"

"Ah, yes. Well, we came around to see if you fellows would lend us five thousand bucks for a day or so."

Big Lefty's dark eyebrows shot up in amazement and there was a moment of stunned silence as we checked our ears out. Then the big lefthander laughed and said: "Dixie, you are not only out of your tree, pal; you are in the wrong jungle!"

"Haha! Wrong jungle. Well, I suppose so. Anyway, I told you I'd get right to the point."

"You sure did, jocko," Big Lefty agreed. "And what's more, I'll get right to the proverbial point also. The answer is no."

Dixie Dan Shivers looked at the floor. "Oh," he said quietly.

I lit a cigarette and gazed through the smoke at Dixie Dan's crestfallen face. "What do you need five grand for, Dixie?"

He looked at me with a fleck of hope in his hazel eyes. He said: "We want to buy a bank job from the Caser, Lucky."

"The Caser?"

"Yeah. You see, he's in town tonight, and he's got a small hick jug lined up somewhere in this vicinity that's worth at least fifty Gs. But he won't sell the plan for nothing but cash, which we ain't got."

"I see. And he wants five thousand for the layout?"

"Right on, Lucky. But like I say, we can't seem to get it together."

A conniving look appeared in Big Lefty's murderous black eyes.

"That's really too bad, Dixie," he said. Then in a more intimidating tone: "But then again, I don't think you boys are cut out for taking a bank in the first place. That type of chore is more in our line of business than yours."

"Well," Dixie Dan tentatively agreed, "maybe you're right, But then again, I think this bank is just a snap burglary deal. Maybe we *could* handle it. I don't know, for sure." He looked into Big Lefty's menacing eyes and quickly changed his tack. "I guess you're right after all, Lefty. Maybe it *is* too much for us."

"I know I'm right," the big Indian said with typical immodesty. "I'm always right in these things, Dixie. And a lot of other things too," he added, looking significantly at Little Manuel and me.

"Hooray," I said.

"*Ole*," echoed Little Manuel.

Big Lefty ignored us. He went on talking to Dixie Dan Shivers.

"I tell you what I'm going to do, Dixie," he said, spreading his great hands magnanimously. "I'm going to stake you to a half C, and then maybe you can run it up over at Chippy Parkington's crap game. All you got to do is tell me where the Caser is. I think me and the boys here will buy in on that piece of action ourselves."

Dixie Dan fidgeted a little in nervous disappointment, appeared to think the proposition over and then finally shrugged in deprecation. He said: "I guess I got no choice in the matter. You see, to tell you the truth, Lefty, we're in quite a bind, right now. In fact, we're actually hungry, we got the shorts that bad. That fifty will look mighty good to us."

He eyed the bottle of Bourbon on the table. "Come to think of it," he added, "we

ain't only hungry; we're pretty thirsty, too."

Little Manuel snickered and spoke up: "Solemn Sol will give you each a glass of water on your way out. Tell him we said so."

Big Lefty chuckled and then looked directly at me. "Give Dixie fifty dollars, Lucky."

I stiffened and stared at him. "Me? Why me? Why don't *you* give it to him, big shot? It's your brainstorm."

The giant sighed and rolled his eyes at the ceiling. Then: "Manuel?"

"What?"

"Give Dixie the half C."

"*Non comprende.*"

"I said give him the fifty, you sawed-off little spick!"

"Nix, you overgrown half-breed mick!"

The big conniver sighed again and then hoisted his massive bulk from the table. "Sometimes," he said reproachfully, "I think you two birds are the chintziest crooks on the face of the city!"

"Yeah," I said. "I ought to be ashamed of myself."

"Me too," accorded Little Manuel, giggling inanely.

Big Lefty grunted. He took out his roll and peeled off two Jacksons and a Hamilton.

"Here you are, Dixie," he said. "Have a meal and a drink on me. Now, tell me where to find the Caser. And woe betide you, boy, if you're just trying to con me. I'll have Manuel castrate The Dummy and then cut out your tongue without washing the blade."

The silent Dummy looked dismayed as Dixie Dan Shivers eagerly accepted the money.

"Thanks a lot, Lefty. And I swear on Capone's grave that I ain't conning you about the Caser. You can find him at the Royal hotel, room six-twenty. He's registered under the name of Brockman. But listen—you'll have to get to him tonight, as the job he's got lined up has to be done by tomorrow morning."

"Okay, pal. Now, you take your dumb buddy and get to hell out of here. The boys and I are going to have a little private chat."

"Umm. Haha! Private chat. Right on, Lefty. C'mon, Dummy. And thanks again, boys, We'll see you guys."

AFTER THE sorry twosome had left, the monster re-lit his cigar, poured another round of double hookers, sat back down and said: "Well, clods, what do you say? I think it's time we got aquainted with the Caser and buy a piece of action from him. Are we agreed?"

"Suits me, jocko," Little Manuel said amiably.

"Likewise," I concurred.

Big Lefty beamed. "That's fine," he said. "You know, clods, it don't digest well with me to be sitting around on my thumbs and laurels, whatever that is. I like to be up and about, doing things and making the scene. You know, we ain't had our grubby little paws in the till for some time, and so I think we should do something about it."

"Hear, hear," I said.

"Amen," followed Little Manuel.

"Good. I'm glad to see you clods are staying in the right frame of mind. Now," he continued, smiling wolfishly at us, "each of you dig down and come up with one thousand six hundred sixty six dollars and sixty six and two thirds cents!"

"Awrrk! What in the hell for?"

"It's to be your fair share of the five grand we pay the Caser for the setup, you dungheads!" he glared at us.

"Oh."

"Echh!"

"Yeah. And when it's over, I pull the fifty I gave Dixie Dan right off the top before we even talk about the split. Understood?"

"Ah—Okay with me."

"Manuel?"

"What?"

"Understood?"

The little card-sharp shrugged, "*Si*," He said. Then sighing, he added: "I'll flip you gringos for that extra two-thirds cents."

Five minutes later found us riding along in my white station wagon heading for the Royal to see the Caser. Although we had never before conducted any business with the Caser, we knew of him, and of his reputation very well. This fellow went around and about the country casing banks, jewelery stores and anything else appealing to the underworld. When he lined out a job it was practically infallible, and if anything did go wrong during the operation, it was generally odds on that it was through some negligence or oversight on the taker's part. For it was well

known that the Caser makes few mistakes, if any.

After he checks a potential taking inside out, upside down and crosswise, the information is available to a professional taker for a reasonable price. And I've never heard of him having any dissatisified customers. He was considered a real artist in his line, and so we were a little more than anxious to get in his face.

I FOUND a place to park about half a block from the main entrance of the Royal. We got out and made the short walk back. We crossed the gray-tiled floor of the lobby to the antique registration desk where the giant asked the goggle-eyed clerk for Mr. Brockman in room six-twenty. This desk clerk was obviously a homo, and he favored Big Lefty with what he probably considered his most charming smile.

"Yessir, big boy," he cooed. "You may use that self-service elevator over there."

Big Lefty grunted and the led the way to the elevator with Manuel and I smiling at each other behind him. With a frankfurter finger the giant punched the sixth floor button, and as the car ground slowly upward we stood in a semi circle smirking and chuckling until Lefty shook his head in hopeless resignation at our humor.

"I don't know," he said in apparent dispair, "how I ever got tangled up with you two oddballs."

Little Manuel mocked the desk clerk's effeminate voice: "You were just lucky, big boy. Teehee!"

I laughed and started to add my bit but Big Lefty cut me off.

"Never mind," he snarled. "Here we are."

The doors slid open and we walked down a long, green-carpeted corridor looking at room numbers. We found six-twenty on the left at the far end of the hall. I tapped lightly on the paneled door and then Big Lefty shouldered me aside impatiently.

"That ain't no way to knock," he growled. "You got to lay it on good like a man, not like some kind of pansy!"

Taking his ham-sized fist he delivered four resounding blows that sorely taxed the wooden fibers and, indeed, even rattled a heavily-urned plant standing in a nearby corner.

"*Madre Dios!*" Little Manuel exclaimed. "The poor man will think the police are arrived!"

"Ahh, shut up!" said the big man. "In this world you gotta be assertive, whatever that is."

At that point the door

swung open widely, and there standing before us was a tall, heavyset blond man looking to be in his thirties. He wore a satiny maroon robe over his shirt and slacks and was puffing importantly on a freshly lit cigar. He looked at us, an amused glint in his ice-blue eyes.

He said: "I thought I heard someone knock. Did you gentlemen wish to see me?"

"Mr. Brockman?"

The man seemed to be appraising us all simultaniously as he framed his answer. Then: "Yes," he admitted. I'm Brockman."

"Good," said Big Lefty. He bobbed his great head and winked conspiritorily. "We've come to discuss a matter of business with you, Mr. Brockman."

The man took the cigar from his sardonic mouth and smiled.

"You have?" he said politely. "May I ask in what capacity?"

Big Lefty looked up and down the hall before answering. "We can't discuss it out here, fellow. This has to be private."

"Oh. Well, in that case—" The man stood accomodatingly aside and made a gesture for us to enter.

Inside the small foyer Big Lefty doffed his hat and then indicated with a sharp nudge in my ribs for Little Manuel and I to follow suit. We threw the lids on a stiff-backed embroidered chair and stepped into a compact sitting room.

"Sit down, gentlemen," our host invited, "and tell me what you have in mind."

Big Lefty said: "Mr. Brockman, I'm not going to beat around the bush. I'm going to lay my proverbial cards on the proverbial table, get down to the proverbial brass tacks and speak the proverbial turkey."

Oh, Lord, I thought. Proverbial, indeed.

But the blond man only regarded Big Lefty a little curiously, and then the big conniver went on hurriedly. He said: "We were talking to Dixie Dan Shivers earlier this evening, and he told us you had a little something going for a fee of five grand. Now, we're here to ask you; is there any truth in this matter?"

The man rolled the cigar thoughtfully around in his mouth, went to a small buffet drawer, opened it, then paused and turned back to us. "Before we proceed any further, gentlemen, I believe I'm entitled to know with whom I'm dealing."

"Oh, of course!" Lefty accorded. "I'm called Big Lefty, this platinum blond towhead is Lucky Jack Silver and the runt there is called Little Manuel. I

think he's a wetback, but he claims he's a Chicano."

Little Manuel bristled. "At least," he retorted, "I ain't no fugitive from any half-breed reservation!"

The man chuckled lightly, then: "Ah, yes. I've heard of you boys. You're said to be quite a team of free-lancers—despite your quarrelsome natures."

Big Lefty beamed. "That's us all over," he proclaimed. He sat down heavily on a small divan, and Little Manuel, looking around, decided to sit next to him. I chose a red psuedo-leather chair nearby.

Brockman procured a bottle of Scotch from the buffet drawer and placed it on the coffee table in front of the contrasting pair on the couch. Next he produced some drinking glasses, poured some liquor into each and passed them around, retaining one for himself. He sat down on a chair that matched mine, raised his tumbler in a tentative toast, took a sip and then looked directly at the big semi-Irishman.

"You mentioned Dixie Dan Shivers, Lefty," he said. "Am I to understnad that you wish to purchase the setup he had in mind?"

Big Lefty nodded. "This is true," he answered. "Dixie can't make it, Caser. Er—you are the Caser, ain't you?"

The man grinned at him. "That's what they call me, Lefty. You say Dixie can't make it?"

"This is also true," the big man confirmed. "You see, Dixie and The Dummy came to us tonight wanting to borrow the bread. I told him no. If I was a bank president back in Willy Sutton's heyday, I'd sooner have given Willy a job as a security guard than advance any money to Dixie. That's how much I trust the bum."

A small chuckle, then: "I see. All well and good then, gentlemen. It doesn't really matter to me who buys the work, just so long as it is taken on by responsible people. I have my reputation to maintain, you know, and I can't farm it out to any incompetents."

"Sure, Caser, we realize that."

"Good. Now, of secondary —but yet paramount importance—is my monitary consideration. No offence, gentlemen, but in my business I cannot afford to extend credit to anyone."

"I hear you, Caser," said Big Lefty. "Cash on the proverbial barrelhead. And I don't blame you. There are very few honest crooks around these days."

"I'm glad you see it my way,

Lefty. You brought the cash with you?"

The scar-faced giant nodded. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he extracted a sheaf of bills. Here it is, Caser," he said. "Five thousand iron men in ice cold cash."

"Good." Our host accepted the money, riffled through it with a quick professional count and appeared satisfied at the result. Then, discarding his suave air and sophisticated manner of speaking, he laid it out to us sharp and quick in an argot much more familiar to us.

"Now," he said, "here is the situation. There is a small burg called Morningside fifty-three miles north of here, and they have a tin and plywood cigar box there that they call the Farmers Mutual Trust. Normally, they don't keep enough dough in there to buy a second hand bicycle, but just for tonight, it's different. You see, the rube merchants up there have sponsored a county fair for the hicks in the surrounding area for the last three days, Friday, Saturday, and today, Sunday. Now, all the receipts from this hillbilly cow review are resting in a heavy breadbox they call a safe, and it's just waiting for the right takers to come along. But the takers will have to come along tonight, as they will move the dough tomorrow, Monday. My estimation of the take, based on personal observation, is between fifty and sixty thou.

"As for the law, there is only one cop, and this moron keeps himself occupied with a frowzy-haired waitress in the all-night local greasy spoon five blocks away from the old jug. Now, there is a burglar alarm on this jug, but that can be easily circumvented by disconnecting one main wire outside the bank. Once the alarm is kaput and you go into the side window you got no sweat. The safe is so old and decrepit that its still got 'wanted' posters of the James boys and the Daltons in it.

"And this vault isn't even locked; it just looks like it is. They can't lock it because the only one that knew the combination croaked on a fish sandwich Friday at the fair, and the local rustics ain't had time over the weekend to get an expert in to re-set the tumblers. All you have to do is turn the handle slowly to the left, and the door will obligingly swing open.

"Another thing: Regardless of all that loot in there, you won't have to worry about the yokels taking any extra precautions such as having spare police on duty. They live in a sublime, naive community where crime is practically

unheard of. The last crime wave they had was when a hobo swiped a shirt off a clothesline and that was forty years ago."

Little Manuel giggled. The Caser smiled at him and then went on "Be sure to bring adequate luggage with you to carry the money. It's mostly in small bills with quite a bit of change, and should be rather awkward to handle. You can tote it right out the back door and load it into your car, which you can park in the unlit alley behind the bank. So you see? That's how simple the whole thing is."

It sounded simple, all right. Almost *too* easy. But then again, this was no less than the Caser, and with his reputation, he was to be trusted implicitly.

We smoked, drank, asked a few questions and then the blond man brought out a large sheet of paper on which was a general layout of the town and, most importantly, a detailed diagram of the bank itself.

Penciled in, in a fine hand, were all the notations necessary to completing the work, and to our professional eye the taking looked to be a snap. And if what the man said about the take was true, then this sheet would be well worth five grand.

Satisfied of its authenticity, Big Lefty stood up, stretched like Gargantua and said "Well, boys, I guess we better get going if we're gonna crack that gizmo tonight. What time is it, Lucky?"

I consulted my hot watch. "A little after ten."

"Good. We've got plenty of time. We'll go back to Solemn Sol's, pick up some hardware and hit the road for Morningside."

Big Lefty snatched up the diagram, folded it and stuffed it in his pocket. We all shook hands with the Caser, who wished us good luck, and we took our leave.

On the way down in the elevator, Big Lefty said to me "Lucky, what means incompetance, paramount and monitary?"

"Nothing," I told him. "It's just the Caser's way of showing us how smart he is with words."

'Aha! That's what I thought."

"Yeah."

He looked at me. "You sure you know what you're talking about?"

"No."

"That's what I thought."

Downstairs, as we passed back through the lobby, the fairy desk clerk asked 'Big Boy' if he'd found Mr Brockman all right.

Without breaking his great stride, Big Lefty doffed his big hat at the fellow and a-

nounced: "Why, yes, madam, I found Mr. Brockman very all right, indeed. And tomorrow, I might come and see how you are."

We went out the door with Little Manuel giggling again

IN LESS TIME than it takes to tell we were back at Solemn Sol's, and as we passed through the crowded outer bar I put the snatch on a fresh jug of Bourbon from the rear shelf and carried it to the back room. Big Lefty shut the door, checked the bolt on the other door lealding to the alley and then told Little Manuel to get out the guns.

I poured a round of drinks and then sat down to check out my thirty-eight snubnose. Big Lefty fondled his forty-five automatic lovingly, worked the mechanism a couple of times, loaded it and then jammed it into his belt. Compared to his massive proportions the big piece of ordnance resembled a toy, whereas the small twenty two target pistol Little Manuel stuck in his own belt was analogous to a cannon

Big Lefty lowered his huge frame into a chair opposite me

"What," he said, "are we going to put the bank money in?"

I thought for a moment and then came up with. "I've got a couple of old suitcases over in my apartment."

"That should be good enough," he said. "Manuel, how's about you going over after them."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because you're the best lookingest."

"Dont try to con me, 'Big Boy' "

"And," Big Lefty went on, "you're also the smallest."

"Which means?"

"Which means you're gonna get it if you don't get cracking!"

"I hear you, fester-head I'll go. But that don't mean I'm afraid of you."

"Manuel, If I thought you were afraid of me or anyone else I wouldn't associate with you."

"I told you, boy, don't lay no snow on me." Little Manuel swiveled his head around to me "Gimme your door key, Lucky."

I handed him the key to my apartment, which was only a block away. "Just take the suitcases in the bedroom closet, half pint," I told him "Nothing else."

"Don't worry, you tow headed albino," he sneered. "You ain't got nothing in that flea-ridden flophouse I want anyway, except that black-headed bitch that lives across the hall from you."

"Leave her alone too, you self-styled Casanova."

"Ha! If I ever get my hands on her she'll never even look at another man!" Then with a haughty air familiar to Little Manuel, the small goniff downed his shot and left out the back door that led to the alley

After Little Manuel had gone, Big Lefty re-bolted the alley door, took out the diagram and spread it on the table. He looked at me, his teeth bared in an evil grin

"Well, Lucky, my boy," he said, "if everything goes all right, by this time tomorrow the three of us stand to be at least forty five grand richer "

"I'll drink to that."

We both drank to it. Then we toasted the Caser We saluted a number of other things as well, and then as we were about to pay homage to Madam Chang's prosties on Newport Road there came a knock on the door leading to the outer bar, and Solemn Sol stuck in his round, shiny head.

Big Lefty regarded the sad-eyed proprietor with irritation.

"Sol," he said, "can't you see we're in conference?"

Solemn Sol looked at him and then shifted his gaze to the table

"What conference, already?" he cracked. "You two schlemiels look more like you're having a race to the alcoholic ward."

"Leave our livers out of it, baldy. What you got on your mind this time?"

"Dixie's here again, Lefty "

"What! For Chrissakes! What does the schmuck want this time?"

"I donno. He just says it's very important he talks to you Both him and The Dummy look all shook up about something."

The big left-hander emitted a long, tolerant sigh "All right, Sol," he said patiently, "send the phonies in "

Dixie Dan Shivers and The Dummy came in with their hats in their hands, and it was obvious they were in a state of very nervous disorder

Big Lefty looked them over sardonically. "What's the matter with you two jackasses?" he demanded. "You act like you

got a bad case of the galloping crud."

His lean frame shaking visibly, Dixie Dan eyed the paper on the table. Then, his voice nasal and quivering, he said: "You—you'll probably kill us, Lefty."

The giant nodded. "I probably will," he agreed. "And in damn short order too, if you don't tell me what's on your mind"

Dixie Dan Shivers pointed a nervous finger at the diagram on the table. "D—Did you get that from the Caser?"

Big Lefty scowled mockingly. "Y-Yes, I g-got it from the Caser! So what? We paid five grand for it!"

"Oh!"

"Whaddaya mean, 'oh?' "

"I mean—I mean—well—we were over at Chippy Parkington's dice game and we heard the latest Word."

Big Lefty's cruel black eyes narrowed and the scars on his saturnine features paled.

"Go ahead, Dixie," he said slowly, "tell me about that Word."

"You ain't gonna like this. The Word is that a professional con man has come to town looking for the first hoods he can score on before he takes off like a big bird."

I began to get a queasy feeling in my stomach.

Big Lefty's venomous voice seemed to emanate directly from hell as he said: "Go on, Dixie baby."

Dixie Dan Shivers' eyes widened in fear. He gulped twice, gave a nervous look at The Dummy and then panned jerkily back to Big Lefty. "This con-artist," he stuttered, "is posing as the Ca-Caser. And what's worse, he goes by th-the name of Brockman!"

WELL, IT IS almost impossible for me to record the next few seconds accurately, as I was in a temporary state of apoplexy. I do recall, however, the blood-red face of the infuriated Indian as he crumpled up the diagram and hurled it with tremendous force at hapless Dixie Dan, the balled up paper striking the latter in his narrow chest to drop into the hat he was holding.

He yelled wildly, then he and The Dummy beat a hasty retreat from our accumulating wrath while they were still in one piece and we were temporarily immobilized with stupification.

It was a full five minutes before I could locate my tongue, and when I found it I rolled it around in a dry mouth as I mentally framed the scathing words I wanted to spit out. I kicked the gaping door

shut and glared hotly at the hulking, brooding Big Lefty

"Well, hot shot," I finally spat, "this is another fine mess you've gotten us into!"

"Ah, shut up!" he growled.

"Yeah," I went on heatedly, "there he sits! Behold the big schlemiel in his brutish idiocy! There he presides at the table—a fugitive lord from the lunatic ward! The big brain. 'Lucky,' he says, 'this time tomorrow,' he says, 'this time tomorrow we'll be forty five thousand dollars richer,' he says! Horse-crap, I say! Not only this time tomorrow but right here and now we are five thousand dollars poorer!"

"I told you to shut up!"

"I'll set you on fire first! You fouled up good and proper this time, baby. This time you did it up real brown. Only the brown is on us, you imbecile! We have been thoroughly and totally messed upon!"

The big goon jumped to his feet and his chair clattered back against the wall. He leaned across the table and shook his bowling ball fist in my fist

"I told you to shut up, you hard-headed jackass!" he bellowed. "How in the hell can I think with you shooting off your mouth all the time?"

I jumped up and shouted right back: "Whoever heard of a rhino thinking!? You couldn't think if you were in a monastary!"

"Listen here, you dumb son of a—" He pulled up short, cocked his head and held up his platter-sized hand for silence. "Did you hear something, Lucky?"

"Not with your liver-lipped mouth flapping, no!

"Listen!"

Then I did hear it. It was our secret knock on the alley door. That would be Little Manuel back with the unneeded luggage. Boy, I thought, just wait till the little sidewinder finds out how we've been taken Man, was *he* in for a surprise!

But I was in for a surprise myself.

Big Lefty stalked over, slid back the heavy bolt and swung the door open. In walked Little Manuel looking a mite dishevelled, a cold, impassive expression on his dark, aquiline features. He held his open stiletto to one side, the long blade dripping fresh, rich red blood.

"Goddam, Manuel!" Lefty exclaimed. "What in the continental hell have you been into?"

Silently, Little Manuel shut the door, bolted it, then crossed the wooden floor to a small wash basin and began washing off the gleaming steel as Big Lefty and I watched him in mute fascination. He dried the

wicked looking blade on a paper towel, then deftly flicked it shut with an ominous clack. He regarded us with cool, impersonal eyes and then blandly announced "I just killed Dixie and The Dummy"

SURPRISINGLY enough, Big Lefty looked aghast. "You—what?"

"You heard me, jumbo. Even now the two dead bastards are laying out there in the alley waiting for the bus to hell."

"I'll be double damned," I said.

"And you deserve it," Big Lefty agreed, then turned back to Little Manuel. "Tell us what happened, pal. I don't quite get it. I know we was hot at Dixie Dan for steering us into a con man, but not enough to—Hey! Wait a minute! Manuel, how'd you know about them telling us the Caser was a phoney?"

Declining to answer immediately, the little killer took a wad of crumpled paper from his breast pocket and spread it open on the table. It was the diagram Big Lefty had flung at Shivers a short time ago, and we both stared at it stupidly.

Little Manuel watched our confoundedness with something akin to amusement, then smiling enigmatically, he remarked casually "Who said anything about the Caser being phoney?"

"Why," said Big Lefty, "Dixie Dan came in right after you left and told us as much. He said Brockman was a ringer"

Little Manuel snorted. "Sure," he smirked. "And do you know why? I'll tell you why. He was making a do-or-die attempt to get his hands on this bank layout we got. That's why. And he was succesful too, up to a point. A stiletto point, that is."

"I don't get it," I said, scratching my head.

"I know you don't," Little Manuel conceded "But you will when I tell you what happened."

"So tell us already, you little shrimp!"

"So I will already, if you guys will just sit down and open those potato farms you call ears."

Big Lefty retrieved his fallen chair, replaced it at the table and sat down. I poured out three rounds and sat also

Little Manuel snapped off his slug quickly and then helped himself to another Still standing, he places his slender-fingered hands on the table, leaned over it like a junior executive about to deliver a progress report, and then with a great deal of gesticulations that

reminded me of an Italian I once knew, he proceeded to give us an accounting.

"Well," began Little Manuel, waving his frail arms, "I am heading for Lucky's pad when who do I see coming toward me but No-name. He seems all excited about something, and signals me into a dark doorway where we can talk. He says he wants to return us a favor from the time we save him from that big Courthouse in the Sky. Then he goes on to tell me that he overhears Dixie Dan talking to The Dummy a while ago as they are standing over the grate that is just above No-name's basement room window in Fu's flophouse on Eighth." He paused, and then proceeded.

"Now, according to what he hears, the syndicate has a contract out for these two, and so they are a little more than anxious to get out of town. In fact, they are desperate. But the two feys are broke, and between them they ain't got enough dough to get to the city limits, let alone out of town—as if it would do them any good. But at least they could live a time longer if they got scarce, and so they contacted the Caser. But as you know, they couldn't raise the loot to buy the job we did. Incidently, the Caser is alive and well, and living at the Royal under the name of Brockman. And he ain't no ringer.

"Now, to get back to Dixie Dan and his pal, they figured we already bought the job they had in mind in the first place, and so they don't know which way to jump. No-name learns all this as he is listening and watching from his basement window. Next, The Dummy writes something down on a pad, tears it off and hands it to Dixie Dan. His buddy reads it, thinks it over and then says okay, anything is worth a try, as they are walking dead men anyhow. He wads up the note, throws it into the grate and away they go.

"No-name reaches out, spears the message and it goes something like this: 'Lets go see if we can fool Big Lefty out of whatever plan he got from the Caser tonight. Tell him the Caser's a con man. Maybe we can get the details free, pull the job and get outta the country.'

"So," went on Little Manuel, "that was enough for me. I slipped No-name a double saw and beat tracks back this way to warn you about what Dixie Dan had in mind. Just as I got near I saw the two of them scurrying out the front door of Sol's here, and Dixie's got the diagram in his hand, just as they'd planned. I stopped them on the corner and displayed my

iron. Then I marched them around to the alley and was going to bring them in here when the scurvy mongrels tried to scrag me. They came at me hammer and tongs. For a moment they almost got me. I dropped my gun in the fight.

"So there was nothing for it but the blade. I came out with my shiv and was so damned mad I really worked them over. And if I do say so myself, it didn't take me all night to finish the business. I know just how and where to go about it, and in less time than it takes to tell they are lying dead at my feet."

Little Manuel stopped his rapid-fire narration and brought his arms in for a landing.

"Go on, Manuel," Big Lefty urged, impressed.

"Go on? That's all there is, unless you want my life story."

"Funny. Anyhow, you did a good job. But we'll still have to get those suitcases."

I said, "I'll get them myself when we get rolling."

"Good enough," Big Lefty nodded. "But first we'll have to do something about Dixie Dan and The Dummy out there."

Little Manuel shrugged. "There's nothing you can do about them," he said. "They're beyond all help."

Big Lefty registered exasperation. "I know that, Manuel," he said patiently. "What I mean is, we can't leave them so close to our headquarters. We got to get rid of them. You dig?"

"Ugh! Me dig."

"Ah, shut up. Now, Lucky?"

"Here I is, boss."

"Boss, schmoss! Don't get cute. Just be cute enough to go get your wreck and bring it around into the alley. We'll get Sol to lock this door behind us and we'll meet you out there."

"Okay. But I hope you know what you're doing."

"I always know what I'm doing, towhead. You just do like I told you. We got no time to lose."

"All right, big boy. I just wanted to make sure."

"Get out of here!"

"See you in the alley," I said.

IN A MATTER of minutes we had the cadavers loaded into the rear of the wagon and covered with an old tarp. Next, I drove to my place, ran up to the apartment, grabbed the two old suitcases from the closet, blew accumulated dust off them and sprinted back to the waiting car. In my short absence, Little Manuel had gone across the street to an all-night drugstore, and was now back in his seat chomping noisily from a long bag of hot, buttered popcorn.

"I told the little hoodlum," Big Lefty said, "not to put that greasy junk in his belly on top of all the booze he drank tonight. He must have a calcified stomach, whatever that is."

"I'm entitled to a snack now and then," Little Manuel countered. "I get a little hungry once in a while."

"Just stop making so much noise with it," I told him. "You sound like a Malayan frog war"

"Sez you."

"Knock it off," Big Lefty said. "Let's go get rid of Dixie and The Dummy Head for Kennedy Park."

"Right," I agreed, and drove off.

To say I was nervous with the two bodies in the car would be an understatement. And the nauseating racket Little Manuel was producing with his damned popcorn, rattling the stiff paper bag and smacking his lips after each swallow, did nothing to quell my inner tension

"I wish you'd hurry up with that stuff," I said. "You remind me of a hog eating acorns"

"You're a farm boy, hey, Lucky?"

"Ah, shut up!"

We entered Kennedy Park from the main entrance at the south end, and I drove through the winding gravel roads until we reached the top of Art Hill. Up here, in front of the Museum of Science and Natural History there were several life-sized replicas of prehistoric dinosaurs standing about, and I parked in the shadow of Tyranosaurus Rex, the most fearsome, ferocious and vicious predator ever to roam the face of the earth That was, of course, until Big Lefty had come along.

And speaking of that particular monster, he now said "This is a good spot, Lucky You guys sit tight and I'll do the honors."

With a minimum of effort the mammoth hoisted the last mortal remains of Dixie Dan and his pal from the wagon and propped them thoughtfully if not artistically against one of the trunk-like legs of Rex, took off his hat and held it in mock sympathy to his chest for a moment, then spat on the ground and got back in the car

"Let's go," he said

I aimed the car at the northern exit and drove along much more at ease, even though the crackling of Little Manuel's bag was increasing as he delved deeper and deeper into his matinee ambrosia

We hadn't got two blocks from the park when I heard a siren screaming behind us, and the rear-view mirror reflected the red flashing lights of a fast

approaching police car *Now what?* I thought.

"Pull over to the side and let them go ahead on, Lucky," Big Lefty ordered. "They're probably after somebody."

I did as he said. But instead of going ahead on, the damn cruiser squealed to a noisy stop and parked diagonally in front of us, the siren dying in a low, ominous growl. Two cops jumped from the squad car and came swiftly toward us, flanking the wagon. I heard Little Manuel cock his target pistol, and from the corner of my eye noticed Big Lefty ease his automatic from his belt and hold it low. I'd already gotten my snub-nose out and it was lying beside me, next to the door.

"All right, boys," said the cop at my window, "We got you."

"Got us for what, officer?" I asked innocently. "I've been obeying all the traffic laws."

The one at Big Lefty's window said: "We ain't got you for no traffic violation, bud. We got you for that nasty little mess you just left behind."

Chrissakes! They must have seen us dump the bodies! I swear I could hear my arteries hardening.

Big Lefty said: "Look here, officer. We don't have to answer any questions if we

indicate in any manner that we don't want to. It's the law. We got our rights, you know."

"Now look here, big boy, We got you dead *to* your so-called rights! We seen it with our own eyes! Which one of you is responsible?"

"I am, officer," Little Manuel piped up from the back seat. "These two guys had nothing to do with it."

Big Lefty swung his head around. "Shut up, you self-incriminating little fink!" Then to the cop: "Responsible for what, officer?"

"What!? Responsible for what, did you say? I'll tell you what. We've got you cold turkey on a seven twenty four, a littering violation!"

"Littering?"

"Yas, godammit, littering! Who threw the damn popcorn bag out the window?"

They issued Little Manuel a citation under one of his aliases, and the little litterbug agreed to appear in court on his own

recognizance. After they left I sat there swearing for a full sixty seconds without repeating myself, and both Little Manuel and Big Lefty marvelled at my expertise in unbridled profanity. Finally sighing in resignation, I shifted into gear and resumed the journey.

We stopped once more at the edge of town to gas up, get a sack of hamburgers and some strong black coffee to offset the liquor we'd consumed, and then at last we were on the highway to Morningside.

As we hummed along in the night Big Lefty took out the crumpled plan of the bank and studied it under the dash lights, clucking satisfactorily and nodding to himself now and then. Little Manuel busied himself sharpening his knife.

In due time we reached a sign that told us Morningside was five miles ahead. Big Lefty half turned in his seat so he could see both Little Manuel and myself, then said:

"All right, boys. Here's the way we'll do it: when we get into town, we'll drive around the jug once, then we'll roll over and see if that rube cop is in the all-night restaurant with the waitress. Next, we'll go back to the alley behind the bank. Lucky and I will get out with the suitcases and then Little Manuel will take the car back to the greasy spoon to keep his beady little eyes on the fuzz. In twenty minutes he returns, drives into the alley again where we load up and head south like a bird with snow hitting him in the tail. Now, how does that sound?"

"Wait a minute," Little Manuel complained. "How come I don't get to go in the bank? I like a little excitement too!"

"You've had enough excitement for tonight, Manuel," the big man told him. "Besides, the Caser said the stuff would be heavy and bulky."

"So?"

"So I don't think you're strong enough."

"Ha! One time I took on four broads in an hour!"

"So you say. I say you're too weak to carry a heavy load. You stay with the wagon and keep an eye out for twenty minutes. If the cop leaves the cafe, go by the bank and blow the horn two short blasts."

"Well, okay, if you say so."

"I say so, Manuel."

"So be it," I slipped in lightly.

AS THE town began to unfold a little at a time the houses became more frequent, then the small business buildings appeared and we soon found ourselves on Main Street,

USA, long after closing hours. There was just a smattering of lights, and only one major stop sign at the corner of Main and, of course, Elm. Every little community must have a tree-lined thoroughfare called Elm Street. I believe it's un-American if they don't.

We circled the Farmers Mutual Trust carefully and found that everything looked kosher. Next we drove down Main to cruise past the tiny cafe, and sure enough a wire-haired cop was in there strutting back and forth, motioning with his arms as he talked to the ash-blond waitress who lolled over the counter, her chin resting lazily in the heels of her cupped hands. There was no one else in the place. On the small parking lot outside the cop's police car was nosed up to the side of the clapboard wall.

"Okay," said Big Lefty. "Let's go to work."

I swung left at the next corner and headed back to the bank where I parked in the alley behind the squat gray building with my headlights switched off. Big Lefty got out, removed the suitcases and Little Manuel clambered behind the wheel as I slid out also. I shut the door, then leaned into the window and leveled a finger at the little miscreant.

"Be sure," I told him, "that you be very careful with this car, my friend."

"You go straight to hell," he responded, then drove jerkily off into the night.

"Come on, Lucky!" Big Lefty hissed. "Stop worrying about your wreck. Little Manuel will take care of it. We got work to do."

"Okay, okay," I said testily. "But I got money invested in that automobile."

"How much? Twenty cents? Come on!"

"I'm coming."

We walked into the deeper shadow of the bank and set the bags down. A tall wooden pole was to our left, at the top of which was the main wire of the antiquated alarm system we were to disconnect.

Big Lefty said: "I'll climb up and knock it out." He pulled on his gloves and shinnied up the pole like a monkey—and I was reminded of King Kong on the Empire State Building.

A moment after he reached the top I heard him exclaim: "Goddam!"

I peered up in the darkness. "What's the matter?"

"The damn thing's already been disconnected!"

"Oboy!"

"Look out! I'm coming back down!"

He slid down the pole and thumped heavily to the ground.

Turning to me, he said; "There's something fishy here."

He didn't have to tell me that. I could smell it out for myself. I said: "Yeah. There's something rotten in Morningside."

"Yeah. And you told me once before it was in Denmark."

"Never mind Denmark. Forget Denmark. In this case it applies here and now."

"You're so right. So shut up and follow me. We'll go look at the window..'

We rounded the south-east corner of the bank and came to the window we'd planned on entering. This window faced a narrow gangway between the trust company and a haberdashery—and there was a small neat hole in the glass exactly where we'd figured on cutting to get at the old lock.

And of course the window wasn't latched!

Big Lefty lifted it slowly and then looked at me.

"Maybe they're still in there," he whispered.

"Who?"

"Who! Whoever got here before we did, you fool! Look! You go in the window—it's too small for me to get in without any noise—and then you sneak to the back door and let me in. We'll go to the vault room together and maybe we can catch the dirty crooks in the act."

"Okay. I just hope we're not too late."

"Me too, pal. Now get in there."

I climbed inside with a minimum of racket, then unlimbered the snub-nose and listened intently to the darkness. Nothing but silence. Surely if anyone was still here robbing the safe they'd certainly be making some noise. I cocked an ear even harder. Still nothing.

Big Lefty's voice hissed from the window. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm listening," I whispered.

"Well, listen to me for a change! Go open that back door!"

"On my way."

My eyes accustomed to the dark now, I crept across the rubber-tiled floor, stepped over a low wooden railing and made my way to the rear, passing through a small stockroom, and in another moment I was opening the back door.

Big Lefty stepped inside with his forty five out, shut the door quietly, and then in his hoarse whisper he said: "How's she look, Lucky?"

"Lousy."

"That's what I figured. Well, be quiet and follow me. We'll go to the vault room and if that

safe is empty I'm gonna kill that goddam Caser!"

"Likewise," I said. "He must have sold the plan to someone besides us."

"Yeah. Now come on, and don't make any noise just in case they're still here."

Back through the stockroom we went. Over the low railing and around behind the two tellers' cages. As we approached the door to the vault room we could see it was partly ajar, and there was a feeble light glowing from within.

Just outside the room Big Lefty stopped me, motioned for silence. Then contradicting his own gesture he violently kicked the door all the way open and almost off its hinges.

But the vault chamber was now devoid of any thieves save ourselves. The safe across the room stood solidly on casters, the heavy door agape and the interior staring vacantly at us, with a look like a yawn.

"Son of a bitch!" Big Lefty swore slowly.

"Me too," I agreed. I went over, stooped and probed about inside the ancient safe. Nothing in there but some useless papers and a yellowed placard which I took out and examined.

Big Lefty said: "Is it empty?"

"As empty as your toad-faced head."

"That stupid Caser really screwed up on this one!"

"Well," I commented dryly, "he was right about one thing, anyhow."

"Huh? What's that, Lucky?"

I showed him the placard I was holding. It was an old poster concerning the desired apprehention—dead or alive—of a certain Mr. Jesse James.

WE GAVE the rest of the place a good shaking down, but came up with nothing for our efforts save a little experience. Finally, standing in the midst of a conglomeration of discarded checks, record books and general all-around litter, Big Lefty, his arms akimbo and his hat cocked far back on his head, said: "Well, I guess we've had it. Whoever cleaned this joint out did a thorough job. They got everything but the furniture and the fixtures."

"Yeah. And we get left with the empty bag. Shat upon again!"

"I'm not going to argue with you. Come on. It's about time for Manuel to be getting back. We better get to the rear of the place and watch for him."

We returned to the back door and Big Lefty propped it open a crack where he could keep an eye on the alley. In another couple of minutes we could hear Little Manuel com-

ing, so we stepped outside with the suitcases and let the door lock easily behind us.

The felonious little dwarf was all smiles as he drove up and got out of the car.

"How'd it go, boys?" he asked happily, making me even sicker than I was. "Are those two bags heavy? Do you want this weak little runt to help load them in the car? Ohh, boy! We're rich, ain't we! Money moneymoney! Hey what's the matter, boys? You two master criminals look like you each swallowed a cup of warm hair!"

Oh, the poor ignorant little bastard!

"Come on, boys!" the tiny cutthroat continued, "cheer up! Oh, manomanoman! Money moneymoney! Aiyiyi! *Mamacita!* I just can't wait to get a look at all that lovely money! I'm in a gleeful mood tonight, I'll tell the world! And all I had to do was drive around while my good buddies took all the risk and even spared me from straining myself with the heavy bags! Come on, boys, lets hurry up and get someplace where we can count it all up! Money moneymoney! I love the filthy stuff!"

"Ah, shut up, Manuel," Big Lefty snarled. "There ain't no damn money! Somebody beat us to it!"

Little Manuel shut up abrubtly and looked at me. Then giggling uncertainly he said: "Lefty's putting me on, isn't he, Lucky?"

"No, Manuel," I replied sadly. "Lefty is not putting you on."

"Ai, Chiwawa!" he said, slapping his head. He leaned on the car, giggled again and then said inanely: "Ah, well, That's the way she goes; first your money, then your clothes. When you snooze you lose.

Hahaha!" He slapped his knee.

"Shut up, you little moron!" snapped Lefty. He threw the empty luggage into the back seat of the wagon and then got in, slamming the door hard. "Come on," he ordered, "let's get the hell away from here!"

Little Manuel chuckled some more and got in. I slipped behind the wheel and aimed the heap for home, my mind just short of blowing.

As we got south of town and were zipping along homeward with grim faces, Little Manuel said: "My, my. You boys certainly do take things hard. Yes, sir, you most certainly do. Now me, I go along slow and easy. Tomorrow is another day, I always say."

"That," Big Lefty politely informed him, "is because you are a goddam fool."

Little Manuel straightened up in his seat. "Me? A fool? All right, then. But answer me this, bright boy; Do you know who beat you to the money?"

"Are you crazy? Of course not!"

"Uh huh. That's what I thought. Well, this goddam fool does!"

Stunned by that unexpected statement, I almost turned the car over. Braking and pulling over to the side of the highway, I swiveled to stare at the runt. "What did you say, Manuel?"

"You heard me. I said this goddam fool knows who beat you to the money. That's exactly what I said."

Big Lefty and I exchanged astonished glances, then I panned back to the Latin midget. "I know what you said, Manuel. But what are you talking about? How could you know who beat us to it? Ah, never mind. You've probably been on that Tiajuana grass again."

"Nope. I ain't been on no weed. I said what I said, towhead, and I'm ready to back it up. The guy you're looking for is that cop in the restaurant."

"The hell, you say!"

"The hell I don't say! You're hearing this goddam fool right. Listen. When I got back to that diner I couldn't see either the fuzz or the waitress, although the cop's car was still outside. So I figured they must be nookying it up in the back room.

"Okay. I parked next to his car and went inside, thinking maybe I'd see something hot going on—you know me, I dig sex, man—or at least get a cup of coffee. At any rate, I could keep a better eye on the fuzz from inside, so in I go. And you won't believe this, but when I get in there, I hear the fuzz and the broad in the rear room

arguing so loud they do not even realize I am arrived.

"Now, from all I can hear, he is the bird that sold the information concerning the bank to the Caser in the first place—I told you you wouldn't believe it—and then, after thinking it over and seeing how easy it was, why, he deciced to do the job himself. He is trying to convince the waitress to blow town with him, but she don't want no part of it. Stealing is against the Commandments, or something, she says. She was trying to persuade him to put the money back when I decided to get the hell out before they seen me."

"I'll be a son of a bitch," Big Lefty mused aloud. Then: "Lucky, turn this wreck around. We're going back and get that crooked flatfoot."

"What for?" Little Manuel said innocently.

"What for, you say? Why, to take his ill-gotten gains away from him, that's what for!"

"No need for that," the little libertine announced casually. "Weak as I be and goddam fool that I am, I already got the money."

"You what?"

"That's what I said, festerhead. While the bluesuit was still in the back trying to get the dame to leave the straight and narrow, I picked the lock on the trunk of his prowl car. Even now the swag is in the rear of this very wagon under the tarp. There's a whole seabag crammed full of the beautiful, germ-ridden stuff, and it's just waiting to be counted."

Once again Big Lefty and I exchanged surprised looks. Then, beaming now, Big Lefty said: "Manuel, you sweet little bastard, I take everything back. You ain't weak and you ain't no goddam fool. You are a fine broth of a man, and I'll kill the goddam fool as says different."

"My sentiments, exactly," I put in.

"Why, thank you, boys," Little Manuel said happily. "You are both too, too generous with my well-deserved praise."

There turned out to be a little better than fifty-three grand in the seabag, and for a little extra icing on the cake, the next day we split twenty thousand more that Little Manuel had gleefully collected from the syndicate for doing in Dixie Dan Shivers and the Dummy. I was so happy that I treated the little feloneer to three days of disportation at Madam Chang's and almost wore my own self out during the process. But what a wonderful, tired feeling it was.

MONASTERIA

by DAVID MAGIL

Inside that gloomy old castle of torture, a helpless man had been done to death. I knew who had done it. But the proof?....

THE WIDOW was beside him. She was Swedish and better than anything he'd seen five hours before in the snow in Stockholm.

"The next right, at the cemetery," Ewa Crop said. "But I don't want to go there."

Scape smiled. He was having a good time. He'd arrived in Palma two hours before and he'd picked up the circus vehicle, the SEAT 600, had found and gathered up the widow and the witnesses.

"Mrs. Crop. If you want your husband's insurance money, I suggest you cooperate. It shouldn't take long."

"And then you'll delay paying because of some other reason. My husband died November 28th, almost one year ago. I'm very tempted to employ an American attorney to make you pay your debts."

"Not my debts. I'm a business analyst. It was a big policy. I happen to be a friend of the chief of investigations of the company. I was on business in Stockholm and knowing I was coming over, he asked me to drop in and make a quick decision."

"About what, Mister Scape?"

"Essentially about you. Bluntly, is there any chance you murdered your husband and any hope we might prove it? The law says you can't profit from a murder. If I think you did it and there's a chance to get you, then the company has its excuse to go to war."

They wound around the one and a half lane road, by fields of olive trees that were twisted and gnarled and grotesque, like walking deformed madmen quietly stalking over the earth; and there were the frail little

almond trees and everywhere there were rocks.

"Is that the cemetery?" Scape asked, suddenly rounding one more turn and seeing the walled crowded little village of the dead. There were tiny little houses and as they got nearer Scape could see the walls were made of sealed drawers of the dead. No one answered.

"Must be old, huh?" Scape asked. He liked Europe. He liked the age, the history, the time span.

"No. It's not very old. It's about late 18th Century," Ewa Crop replied.

Scape pulled over to the side, making the right turn and then stopping. It was hot, deliciously, uncomfortably hot

after the snow and ice of Sweden.

"They have an older cemetery?"

"No, not that I know. I don't think they do."

"But they've been inhabited for at least a couple thousand years."

"Yes, but I believe they don't stay buried. They bury you and then after decomposition, if you don't pay annual fees, you are reburied or maybe just discarded."

"No, Ewa," the young man in the back seat said. His name was Michael Randolf-Wilson, an Englishman. "They have their religion. They can't be dug up or thrown away. They have to be in sacred or consecrated soil, don't they?"

"They don't," his sister Stephanie said. The brother and sister were the ones who'd found Stanley Crop's body. "Because none of them or almost none of them are really in the ground. They're above it."

"Interesting question. Living here all this time and we don't know the answer," Randolf-Wilson said. "We'll have to ask about it, Scape."

"Do that. Just along this road," Scape asked, fiddling with the mushy gear box to probe for first.

"Yes, all the way to the very end," Ewa Crop said. "Mister Scape, what you were saying before. My husband's death was investigated by the local authorities. I don't know what sort of image you may have of them, but they are fully professional. They are as modern as Scotland Yard or your F.B.I. I, obviously, was a suspect and you see that I was not arrested."

Scape shrugged. "I don't question their competence. I know they're good, but nobody's perfect. I've been asked to clear payment or not. Terms of policy state that beneficiary must cooperate in any investigation. Agreed that the company would like to get out of paying you, you might as well go through this with me and get it over with."

"But why do we have to go out to the house?" the girl in the back seat, Stephanie Randolf-Wilson, asked.

"I understand it's a ghost story. Haunted house. Everybody scared to death of the place. Police sort of threw the case up and said maybe the ghosts killed him."

"No they didn't. Maybe the locals said that," Randolf-Wilson said. "The police are convinced that somehow a prowler must have done it or maybe some drinking buddy."

"It's a lousy road. Always this hot?" Scape asked. The little car was spinning up a

cloud of dust. The unpaved road was bone dry.

"No. We have seasons."

"It's a nice island. Long way to go?"

"Another five minutes, Mister Scape."

"Okay Let's review this. What I know is from a telephone call and the company's file. Correct me if I'm very wrong. And my apologies if I get offensive· Crop was poor little rich boy, ne'er-do-well from a family that was degenerating. He lived in the crumbling family mansion and had enough money to keep him in cheap booze. He was pugnacious, a sloppy little drunk. His family, fallen but still living on earlier generations' money, didn't like one of their own in the drunk tank every other night and his not upholding their fancies of family name and honor. They got together and made the standard deal. Crop would get a monthly stipend, hopefully to drink himself to death, if he'd get out of the States and stay out. If they didn't have his agreement they threatened to throw him out.

"So he took the offer, boozed his way around Europe, finally settling here, where there was plenty of sun and unlimited quantities of the cheapest booze. As a joke, drunk and being taken advantage of, he awakened one day the owner of this haunted house. Price was cheap, but the place is unlivable and unsellable. Everybody seems terrified of it. Maids and delivery people refuse to get near it. He thought he wasn't afraid of ghosts but the d.t.s or something scared him enough to build a new house, a small house out where the gate house had once been. Later, even that scared him and he bought land and built your present house out at, how do you pronounce it, Puerto de Andraitx.

"He drank as fast as he could put it away but instead of killing him it pickled him. He got so rubbery he could stagger into cars and bounce off. So he boozed and aged and cashed his generous check every month

"You, Mrs. Crop, were on a two-week holiday, a cheap charter. You'd never done anything in Stockholm, called yourself a model, were a spoiled brat who knew the one thing you had going for you were your looks. You traded on them and would have, but then you took that vacation and you ran into drunken, old enough to be your father, Stanley.

"On a small island like this, everybody knows everything about everybody. You heard Stanley's story, made an estimate of his net worth, decided

that it was your big chance. You canceled your flight back to Stockholm, checked into a cheap *pension* and went after Stanley. One drunken night you befriended him, got him on a plane to Lisbon and another to Gibraltar where you stood him up for the marriage ceremony. When or if he ever sobered up he was probably amused by it all. So back you came and played the good wife. How does that get played in your league? Always have a bottle at hand for the little husband? Put a bottle at his bedside and always see that it's filled? Funny. There you were feeding him buckets of what—Fundador or some similar rotgut? But Crop's guts were beyond the rotting stage. Fast as you could pour it into him, he could absorb it and reach for more."

"You really are quite offensive," Ewa Crop told him.

"There were even letters, anonymous ones, to the Barcelona Consulate saying that you were trying to get him to drink himself to death. Apparently a British couple."

"I don't like you, Mister Scape."

"Hardly anyone does. Then what happened? This is it up ahead?"

"That is the gate house, yes."

"Okay. Then you had a fight. What was the fight about?"

"It was a private matter."

"Was it? Let's see. A pickled old drunk like that. You know what my bet would be. I've run into this game before. The old drunks wake up one day and see the light and totally addle brained they fall in love with their lethal child brides. It's the old genes suddenly emerging, all the indoctrination of the innate superiority of the family and the necessity to preserve it. So he came to you and said: 'My dear, I adore you. I've seen the light. I'm going on the wagon. Let's have a son and heir'. And you looked at that svelte body you carry around with you and considered all your well laid plans for widowhood and you threw him out."

"That's sheer fantasy, Mister Scape."

"Yeah. But it's a good story and it would make sense. Everyone always thinks they're unique when they're very young, but I've found that you amateur con artists pretty much play the same games, go through the same dialogue, live out the same theater."

"I'm going to write a very nasty letter about you to your company," Ewa Crop said.

"It's not my company. I'm just doing a favor."

"And I will write a letter,

too," Randolf-Wilson said. "I suggest that you, sir, remember yourself."

"That's one of my problems. I can't forget."

"Actually, Mister Scape, the problem was my husband's sexual ineptness because of his drinking. We fought about that. It was very unpleasant and I said certain things that were unnecessarily cruel. I was frustrated. I regretted what I'd said almost immediately, but Stanley had been badly hurt. I did not throw him out. Minutes after he left I knew that I'd been wrong and wanted to apologize."

"Why didn't you?"

"I hoped he'd come back."

Scape slapped on the little car's brakes and stopped nose to a thick, heavy black chain hung between two massive gate posts.

"And when he didn't? Why didn't you go to him?"

"Well, after the fight I felt terrible and I drank. Unfortunately it is a truism that Scandinavians shouldn't. I awakened with a terrible headache and then I was angry again. I thought to go to him and then decided that he should come to me and then maybe that I needed time to think everything out."

"Go on."

"I knew Stephanie and Mike were going on Lord Vandelaff's yacht for a two-week cruise. We had been invited. On the spur of the moment I decided to go with them. I left a note for Stanley in case he did come home and, of course, everyone in town knew that I went on the cruise."

Scape held out his hand. "The key?"

"I didn't kill my husband and I really would rather not go in, Mister Scape. Whatever you think of me, you should have the decency—"

"I don't even know what the word means," he told her, his hand still patiently waiting.

Ewa Crop went into her pocketbook and dug it out. Scape got out of the car and went to the gigantic ancient iron padlock and with the foot long key

unlocked it and then lowered the chain. In the heat, the chain was heavy enough so that it made him sweat. It was that hot. Almost dusk. November. And it was that hot "It's okay to drive over it?"

"Yes"

Scape went back to his side of the car and folded himself into the little wheeled box. He was a tall, thin, cold looking man. He wasn't handsome, but he had a confidence that was impressive if not likeable. He carried himself well.

"Okay. So Stanley came out here after the fight. The place was just sitting empty—"

"It always is empty. No one will go into it."

"That's not what you told the Spanish police."

"Well, sometimes we've put foreign guests up there."

"The ghosts get them?"

"You may be surprised, Mister Scape. There are strange things in the Monasteria."

"Ghosts," Scape said, unimpressed. "You all believed in them and you wouldn't spend a night in the place. Not even happy there, the closest you'd get was the gate house. Stanley settled in there and boozed it up. Right?"

"Apparently, yes," the widow conceded.

"In the meantime you all cruised the Med with Lord Vandelaff, who once had something to do with British Intelligence, was a pal of the British Prime Minister and whose veracity was unimpeachable. Two weeks at sea and short visits ashore and then back here to Mallorca. You got back in the evening of December first. You made no attempt to contact Stanley"

"I asked about him. People told me he was out here and that he was all right—drinking, but he always drank."

"And you made no attempt to contact him on the second?"

"I had a terrible migraine headache. I took four nembutals. That next day didn't exist for me. But the following day, the third, as soon as I awakened I knew that despite our problems I wanted to have a reconciliation with my husband. Perhaps for his money, if you wish to believe that."

"Go ahead."

"I didn't go myself. Call it pride. I asked Stephanie and Mike to come out and tell Stanley that I was sorry and I wanted him home."

"And that's all the story you want to tell?"

"That's the truth, whether you or the company you're doing this favor for like it or not," Ewa Crop said.

"Okay. Now you two. You came out here and what? Chain on?"

"No," Randolf-Wilson said. "It was not."

"What time was it?"

"Approximately four-thirty in the afternoon of December third. Ewa had asked us in the morning but we'd both not gathered our courage, we were suffering the after effects of a little party we'd held on the second and we were delayed by our having to wait for a repairman. That was a cold year, last year. While we were away they even had flurries of snow. It was quite bitter. The heating units weren't functioning."

"But finally you did get here. You went to the gate house, knocked and got no answer."

"That's correct. The assumption was that he was sleeping off a bout with the bottle and not wanting to have to come back or having any real expectation that there was any hour with a greater probability of finding him sober, we pushed in. The door was unlocked. We looked through the house, calling Stanley, and we got no answer and found that though clearly he was using the house, he wasn't in it."

"The what?"

"Then we came back out to the cold and called. His new 124 Sport was parked right there. Stanley was rarely in any condition to drive a car, but he was never sober enough to walk anywhere. We assumed that he had to be near. Much as we disliked it, Scape, when our calling him found no response, we approached the Monasteria. It was bitter cold, dark, very grey and overcast. Night was near. We approached the Monasteria, still calling for him, hoping he would hear us.

"The door was locked. We hammered on it, shouted for him. Nothing. Stephanie then had the idea of trying to look into the windows. She went around to the side of the house, the side facing west. I continued pounding on the door. I wanted to find him and be done with it. I'm not a superstitious man but I frankly do not like the Monasteria and I had no wish to return, even as a favor to Ewa.

"At that point, Scape, as I hammered on the door and called Stanley's name repeatedly, hoping to arouse him from his stupor, Stephanie let out her shriek.

"Frankly, sir, in that situation, at the house, the weather cold and the dark descending, it sent shivers up my spine. In a moment I controlled those and I hurried around the house to her. She was standing, frozen, at the window. The drapes were open. The view was of the old bed, Stanley in it, his head

broken and staining the linen with its blood.

"For some reason it wasn't acceptable to me that he was dead. My first thought was that drunk he'd somehow fallen and then crawled to the bed. I took off my shoe and smashed the window. There are bars there, but I was able to call through to him. I called and called and only then did I realize his eyes were opened and frozen."

"Lights on?"

"No, the electricity wasn't on in the house. But there was enough natural light to just see. I backed away, taking Stephanie with me, and then we hurried to the village where I called the police.

"When they arrived we returned. The door was still well locked. The windows were all locked and barred, the bars so close that not even a midget could pass. No one could have gone in but when we went in with the police Stanley had been moved. He was on the floor in the living room. He was dead, he had been dead since the twenty eighth or twenty ninth."

"So the ghosts moved him?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah," Scape said. He looked over at the modern, California-like gate house and frowned at it and then he searched for the muddy first gear and drove in and on to the massive, handsome old house, the Monasteria. He stopped right at the entrance and cut the little sewing machine engine. "Let's take a look."

"Must we?" Ewa Crop asked.

"If you feel that strongly about it, just you, Mike, though I'd be happier if you'd all come."

The house was massive. It was formidable, very rectangular, solid looking. The architecture was a combination of medieval castle and religious fortress. They walked to the door, two great slabs of iron studded wood, a golden fist probing out of the door as a knocker.

"Authentic?"

"No need to restore these old places, Scape," Randolf-Wilson said. "The better people lived in homes built to last. We have unlearned the art."

"Yeah. but our poor don't live in caves, hovels or chains."

"A republican, are you?"

"What is the history of the place?"

They'd all gotten out of the car, it was too hot to stay in it.

"There has been a house on this land for at least two thousand years," Randolf-Wilson said. "The Roman maps, even the copies they sell in Palma have it listed. But this building

is 13th or 14th Century, they think. The Moors were thrown out of Spain in the 15th Century, but they were thrown out of here much earlier. Anyway, it's not clear what the Monasteria was first built for or as. But, most people think that about 1390 it was given to one of the religious orders and opened as a convent."

"Convent is Monasteria."

"No. Monasteria is just a joke, it's not a Spanish word, as far as I know."

"It may be Mallorquin," Randolf-Wilson said.

"No. It's just a joke," Ewa Crop told them.

"The story goes on that during the Inquisition," Michael had moved forward and was opening the big doors, "the house was used by the defenders of the faith. Whether that's true or not, they say in the village that hundreds of men, women and even children were tortured to death here. They were carried up the road we've just come, bundled in horse drawn carts or they were marched up it with men on horseback prodding them on. They walked through the gate through which we came. It was a gate then. And then across the yards, up these steps and inside."

"And they're the ghosts?"

"Oh, no. Not according to the locals. The victims are in heaven. The ones who did the torturing are condemned to everlasting purgatory. They're being beaten and tortured through all eternity."

"Sounds like fun," Scape said.

"You just wait. If you're at all honest, you'll at least feel something inside. There's a presence there."

"I'll hear their screams?"

"They do scream, horribly; and things fall and there are noises. If you're so very brave, Mister Scape, you really must be my guest alone here for a night. At the first thumping sounds, you tell the hairs rising at the back of your neck that there's just some rational explanation."

"And you should hear," Stephanie said, "sometimes on real bad nights when they start shrieking. You can hear them crying and screaming even at the gate house."

Scape smiled and then turned from the women and walked through the opened doors where Mike Randolf-Wilson had already gone. Scape looked at the large room, noticed that the walls were stone and that the doors were almost four feet thick. The room itself was normal, ordinary, reasonably modern. "Where was Stanley?"

"When the police came? Here," Mike said. "Right here."

Scape opened the folder he had with him and took out a police photograph. It showed the murdered man on the floor. The rest of the room had been undisturbed and looked unlived in. The photograph and the room, except for the missing body, looked identical, everything in place.

"Want to show me the bedroom where you first saw him?"

"Right this way," Randolf-Wilson said, walking to the left and then into a corridor.

Scape followed, impressed with the incredibly thick walls, the marble floors, the ornate ceilings.

"This was the room, Scape. Steph broke in that window. The bed was as it is now, stained of course and occupied."

Scape looked into the very small room, it was tiny. The door was a masterpiece, a magnificent chunk of wood; and he noticed that old time Spaniards had mastered the art of getting a door to fit its frame. His hotel room door didn't even come close. "Head was turned toward the window. What about the injury?"

"Quite unmistakeable. Not only the blood but the entire top of his head had been caved in."

"Signs of violence?"

"None. Though a 14th Century crucifix that had always been imbedded in the stone had fallen out of the stone and broken. It was right there, you can see where it was."

"The murder weapon?"

"Yes, according to the police."

"And no evidence of anyone or thing?"

"Not according to the police. There was no way It's not a house that can be broken into. The door was locked, windows are barred."

Scape took out the police photograph and walked around the little room. In the photograph the blood-stained bed had three empty bottles on the floor beside it. Otherwise, it was the same.

"A man named Delgado headed the investigation," Scape said. "I've read his report. What was he like? He seem competent?"

"Officious. Authorities are in every country."

"You saw him here. When you came back he was in that front room."

"He was."

"Marks of dragging, any blood?"

"Not that I saw. But he had been dead for days. We figured we probably were in Tunis when he was killed."

"With Lord Vandelaff keeping second to second tabs on you, so there was no chance you could have flown back for the kill."

"You suspect me or murder, Scape," Ewa Crop said. "What motive?"

"How about the grieving widow and her money? You're not exactly well to do, are you?"

"No. I'm not."

Scape looked around the room again. A very small circular Spanish carpet was beside the bed, the floors were marble, the ceiling was decorated. There wasn't anything in the room that said anything. Reluctantly, he moved away from the cold air coming from the sleeve-mounted air-conditioner, and he walked from the room, the way the body had allegedly walked or been transported by the ghosts.

"Where was the torturing done?"

"In the old days? A dungeon. It's been sealed for a few hundred years, absolutely sealed."

"Maybe the weird noises are things down there."

"Perhaps. Anything else you'd like to see?"

"No. I guess not."

"Ewa going to get your approval, Scape?"

"We'll have to see, won't

we?" Scape said and led the way outside where the two women were standing under a tall old shade tree. Scape moved to the car, Mike following and the women coming over. Then Scape looked back at the great old house. "Oh, what's up on the second floor?"

"There isn't any," Randolf-Wilson said. "Oh, no. That's just the air space. It's nothing."

"An attic?"

"No. There's no way into it. It's sealed. The old time architecture. I think it's a Moorish touch or maybe even Roman."

INSPECTOR DELGADO smiled at Scope "Superb dinner, I'm grateful to you, Mister Scape."

"It's my treat, Inspector. May I ask those few questions?"

"Entirely improper, official business, impossible to discuss

it without authorization from Madrid. Okay. Go ahead, ask," Delgado smiled.

"No criticism. I'm hardly in a position to criticize, but why have you dropped it?"

"Of course it's criticism. Certainly the three of them or at least the two of them engineered the murder, but without the murderer—" he shrugged his shoulders. He was a tall, handsome man who'd been an Embassy brat, had grown up and been educated all over the world, including the States. "It's hardly a locked room murder. Presumably someone was paid, given the key. The dead man was drunk in bed. The hired killer smashed his head in and then the body was carried into the living room. The killer left and he's now in England or Sweden more probably.

"It's difficult, Mister Scape. We have an immense tourist industry. Most probably one of them came and did it and left the island even before the body was discovered. For your purposes that may not be agreeable, but for me it's a matter of near indifference. Europe stops at the Pyrenees. We're medieval, a remnant from the Middle Ages. That's your view. The truth is that our bias is even greater than yours. We generally refrain from killing each other, but have the inclination to believe that it's one of your normal societal behavior patterns. This killing was investigated, we made a genuine attempt to find evidence to bring the widow and her friends to court. We were unable to do that and very frankly I'm considerably more concerned with the incidence of motor vehicle fatalities on our roads."

"I understand. But I wonder whether your bias hasn't hurt you on this. We may murder each other all the time, but with it we have a certain sophistication. I don't think we usually hire a murderer if it's a cold-blooded murder for money. Basic reasoning. If money is the goal, money is all important; and if that's so, we do our damndest not to put ourselves into positions where we could be blackmailed."

The Inspector smiled.

"That's neatly rational, but are murderers?"

"Are you absolutely certain they didn't kill him?"

"There's no way they could have done it. The medical examiner placed the time of death."

"Could he have been wrong?"

"Of course, but his credentials are excellent and the extreme time span still makes it impossible. They were at least a hundred miles away when it

was done. Lord Vandelaff was with them.

"Look, my friend, I accept that you may have an inclination to distrust us, but we're both a product of your system. The medical examiner is a Harvard Med product. I studied with the F.B.I., N.Y.P.D. Maybe Spanish police work could have pinned it on them, but I used American police work and I didn't come up with a case."

"This was your first murder on the island?"

"My first investigation. I'd just been assigned here. But in the States and England, Germany I've been an observer in plenty of them."

"They did it," Scape said. "I don't know how. Vandelaff wasn't drunk or drugged?"

"Sorry. Everything was checked and this is Spain, we have the means to check things. I'm afraid your company is going to have to pay. Certainly I believe they killed him, but I don't know any way to prove that."

Scape got progressively more sour. He checked at the offices of the *Majorca Daily Bulletin* and in their back issues checked the extremely brief account of the murder. He also talked to an effeminate columnist who knew all the gossip but nothing useful. And, just curious, he noticed the weather. He couldn't avoid noticing it. They had photographs and stories about how miserable it had been. It had gotten rainy and cold in late October, it had been quite cold.

He walked out of the *Bulletin* office and headed for *Iberia* to change his flight. He'd give it twenty-four more hours. If he still couldn't think of anything by then he'd give it up. They wouldn't be the first people who'd gotten away with murder.

But he was disgusted about it. Somehow the two or three of them had killed old Stanley and for some reason there didn't seem to be any way to prove it. How had they done it?

He walked, looking into the spectacular old court yards, admiring the mansions and visualizing how they must have been when horses and carriages and even Imperial Spain had commanded the world. And he looked into store windows. There were a lot of American products, very expensive compared to their competition. Zenith, Westinghouse, General Electric, Fedders, Kelvinator. Fedders!

The Crop House at Puerto de Andraitx had a stairway blasted out of the rock. Scape went down the stairs. He'd stopped off at his hotel to get the form

out of his attache case and to get his bags. He was very pleased with himself.

There was a tiny beach blasted out of the rock, too. Sand had been brought in to cover it. It was really just a ledge and the sea, beautiful blue water lapped at it.

The three of them were there. They were wearing the tiniest bathing suits Scape had ever seen. They looked as close to a nudist colony as Scape had ever been. They were bronzed and glittering in the sparkling suntan oil that covered them as almost their only covering.

Scape stood on the lowest step and waiting. He admired them.

Mike Randolf-Wilson was the one who looked up first. No shock, no surprise. Just: "Well, well, if it isn't the great investigator."

The two women lifted their heads from their sun worshipping and looked at Scape.

"Come to say good-by, Scape? I assure you it wasn't necessary. You needn't have inconvenienced yourself."

"No inconvenience. I just came for Mrs. Crop's autograph."

She smiled. "For what?"

"You're a gambler. Want to sign?"

"Sign what?"

"A quitclaim. Your agreement that without prejudice and not as an admission of anything you agree to the company paying you one dollar as full payment of your late husband's policy."

"That's a stupid bluff, Scape," Randolf-Wilson said.

"The policy, Mister Scape, was for one hundred and twenty thousand dollars," Mrs. Crop said. "The terms state that as my husband was murdered you or your friends have to pay me twice that."

"They use the garrote here," Scape told her. "It's an iron collar. But, if you're lucky you might avoid that. I don't think they're all that big on capital punishment. But Spanish prisons are a little rough. The idea is punishment and they're punishing."

"Don't be a fool, Scape," Randolf-Wilson said. "You're wasting your time and ours with this puerile bluff."

"I'm not interested in your opinion, Mike. You're beneath contempt. I don't even know the dirty word for you," Scape said. "Mrs. Crop, this is your last chance. Understand, we have no interest in justice, just money. You sign this and I walk away."

"And if I don't, Mister Scape?"

"You make a bad mistake. I have no idea which of you

bashed his head in, but you did it and I can prove it."

"You suspect all of us," Stephanie asked.

"It doesn't matter. Even if Mrs. Crop was ignorant of the murder she had motive and wants the money and she had the key. She gave the key to you and lied about it. We have her. And you two are lying about the body. It's circumstantial but plenty."

"What motive?" Randolf-Wilson asked.

"You? Money and Mrs. Crop."

"He's talking nonsense, Ewa. Go away, Scape."

"Your very last chance, Mrs. Crop. Are you sure I can't prove it?"

"What will you do, if you really do have a theory?"

"I'm in a hurry. I have a plane to the States to catch. It's about forty-five minutes to the airport. I'll phone Delgado from there. He'll send the local police for you or come out himself to make the arrest. If I'm bluffing you're in fine shape, if I'm not you'll have time to run; but Interpol is effective. They'll get you. So, absolutely last chance. Going once," he said, "going twice," he paused, "lost." He tore up the form and dropped it and then turned and started up the steps.

Ewa Crop called to him just as he reached his car. He turned. She had followed him.

"I don't understand you, Mister Scape. You're a handsome man, an exciting one. Why do you feel so much antagonism toward me."

"Murderers scare me. I'm not afraid of being done in, it's just that stupid people are dangerous. You could have kept feeding him booze, he would have died sooner or later."

"I didn't kill my husband."

"You're a liar."

She smiled. "I say I didn't and there's no way you could prove I did. Why don't you just give up and come in for a drink. If you want money we could discuss that, or perhaps you want me."

He looked at her, up her and down her. "I have another form, of course. You sure you don't want to sign it?"

"You're a fool," she snapped, furious at him.

"Scape," Randolf-Wilson said, just topping the stairs from the beach.

"Mike. What are you doing here?" Ewa Crop said. "Go back to the beach. I'll take care of this."

"No. Scape is trying to be agreeable, Ewa. Why shouldn't we be? Of course we murdered the old drunk, Mister Scape."

"Michael. That's not so. You're lying."

"Don't be stupid, Ewa. There's no question we murdered him. At issue is only whether they can prove the three of us did it. Can you prove it, Scape? Can you prove it in a Spanish court?"

Scape nodded.

"And we understand you? You say your only interest is in the money? If Ewa would sign your paper this would no longer involve you; you'd have no reason to go to Delgado?"

"From the minute the paper's signed, I'm out of it."

"All right. Convince us. How did we kill him?"

"You caved his skull in with the crucifix."

"How? We were at sea when he was killed."

"No you weren't. I kept trying to figure how you killed him before you left. I couldn't because you didn't kill him until the night you came back, the first of December. It was dumb luck that let you get away with it. I grew up in a badly built California bungalow. Delgado always lived in luxurious badly built apartments. The medical examiner is a city boy, from Madrid, and he never saw the Monasteria. Our problem was we couldn't believe it."

"What's that have to do with anything?"

"I was in downtown Palma, where they have air-conditioners for sale, and I remembered that on the day you took me out to the house you'd gone to the trouble of getting the air-conditioners put on out there. Servants don't go into the Monasteria so it had to be one of you and that was strange. You didn't want me to go out there. The house is never occupied. Why was it on, and why was it there?"

"Go ahead," Randolf-Wilson said.

"The police photographs don't show that piece of wall. I asked. The air-conditioning you have is new; it wasn't there when Stanley was killed. At the same time I remembered how insistently you kept telling me how cold it was the day you claim you found Stanley. It kept pointing to before the cruise, but a body after seventeen days is a lot different than a body after a week.

"Anyway, that's the primary confusion. The next point is the Monasteria itself. It's magnificently built. The walls are thick, the doors and fittings are to almost perfect tolerance. As you said, they don't build them that way anymore. It's so unlike the shoddiness of any contemporary building that it's hard to accept. And that brings us to my question about the second floor and your telling

me there wasn't one. Why? The space was there. There must have been some reason for it, some utility to it.

"I asked around and people told me that design is classic. The sealed air in that second floor that isn't a second floor is supposed to act as insulation. In summer the sun bakes the roof, heating the air in that closed space. The heated air loses its heat very slowly so it warms the house in winter. The winter cold then cools the air and that cool air works to make the house more livable through a good part of the summer."

"Your point?" Randolf-Wilson asked.

"The weather was cold the day Stanley was killed, but it had been a damned hot summer. The house had been sealed. The heat in the air of that air space must have been fierce—if we accept the house functions according to design and is as perfectly made as we think—and since the entire house had been closed up all summer the air in the living sections also must have been hot as hell. You put the air-conditioning in because you didn't want anyone to be aware of how intensely hot that place must be at the end of summer, the beginning of winter.

"You killed Stanley in bed. You were clever enough to figure the heat factor and that's why you moved him to the hottest point in the house. You needed that heat to bake Stanley, to dry him out."

"But that doesn't make sense, Mister Scape. If his temperature was warmer wouldn't that place the time of his death later?"

"It's confusing until you think about it. When the medical examiner came over from Madrid he saw a body that had been dead for days and a body that had been refrigerated waiting for his examination. Temperature was no factor at all. In a person just dead it may be, but Stanley hadn't just died. So the time of death was determined by dehydration. Stanley rarely ate, he drank his meals, so the contents of his stomach were nothing. The dehydration of the tissue and organs of the body was how it was determined and you and the Monasteria, we now see, were the ones who'd cooked the juices out of poor pickled old Stanley."

"It's interesting as a theory. Can you prove it?"

"That's easy. It's hot now. According to the tourist office it'll cool down soon. Delgado can use a whole battery of instruments or even a dead animal to test it. I think it'll be enough to take it to court. It was vicious murder for very

obvious gain," Scape said, admiring the almost nude Ewa Crop again, "and I don't see a Spanish court giving you the benefit of the doubt—if there would be any."

Michael Randolf-Wilson and Ewa Crop looked at each other.

"If I sign your paper—If I give up the money, you won't go to Delgado?"

"I'm not a policeman. He's responsible for doing his own job."

"It wasn't premeditated, Mister Scape. Stanley caught me with Michael. He yelled and screamed and threatened. We sent Stephanie in but he didn't want her. Then it happened. And afterwards we realized how hot it was."

Scape took out his pen and the paper and put them on the hood of the car. "He was going to throw you all out, huh?"

Ewa Crop nodded. She walked forward, read the paper, picked up the pen.

"Two hundred and forty thousand dollars," she said, sadly. "You swear you won't tell the police?"

"I'm going right to the airport. Mike, you want to witness this."

They both signed.

Scape looked at the paper, folded it, carefully put it away.

"Well, it was nice doing business with you," he said. Then he turned to the wall. "Gentlemen."

Delgado and two armed Guardia Civil came from behind the wall.

"You are under arrest for the murder of Stanley Crop."

Both Randolf-Wilson and Ewa Crop looked at Scape. He shrugged, smiled. "I didn't say a word to Delgado. All I did was call his office. Inspector," he said, getting into the car.

"I am going to see the three of you prosecuted to the limit of our law. You foreigners are more than welcome here," Delgado told them. Stephanie had been brought up from the beach by two more Guardia. "But perhaps the severity of your convictions will be a meaningful deterrent. If you want to murder people, do it at home, in your own countries." He gestured to the Guardia and they came forward to make the arrests.

"Good-by, Mr. Scape," Delgado said. "You have plenty of time to catch your plane."

An Exciting New Novelet

SOUNDINGS FROM THE GRAVE

by JERRY JACOBSON

Hate drove Julie's sister, hate and an unleashed urge to expose Julie's murderer. The police didn't know where to start, but she did. And she would follow through to the violent end. . .her own, if necessary.

IT HAD BEEN a cold, raw night in Zachary, and throughout the entire county the curse of a freeze looked down upon its residents.

Sheriff Quinn Strowe could feel a freeze as well as anyone, because he was too close to these farmers and he was close to the land. Dairy farmers, his neighbors were, and the Holsteins would be inside this night, where there was warmth.

There was also warmth at the Zachary High Gym, where the Zachary Tigers and the Forks Seahawks were battling to break away from each other in a two-way first-place tie.

Strowe listened to the game on a portable radio in his office. Lonnie Davenport, a kid with firepower and talent, was making a serious assault on Strowe's own musty Zachary High individual game scoring record. Strowe hated to see his record fall because he'd sweated and practiced himself to exhaustion to set it.

To a kid like Lonnie Davenport, everything came as easily as a stroll in a park. Good student, solid social mixer. 12-letter sports star. That ease of acquisition and accomplishment overlapped to include the steady companionship of Zachary High's most sought-after coed.

Julie Knight was bright, beautiful and tenacious when it came to acquiring her own special feminine honors: head cheerleader, vice-president of the girls' club, secretary of the stu-

dent council, and chief organizer for the Tiger Pep and Rally Club. It all made Quinn Strowe feel suddenly older than he'd felt in his lifetime.

The announcer and the crowd were in a frenzy. Forks had knotted the game at 60-60. Lonnie Davenport had 31 of those. And Quinn Strowe had 41 for the record. A record that would be his not much longer than a few minutes of a final quarter of basketball.

The lead see-sawed, as Lonnie Davenport's total continued to creep in on Strowe's. It was tied again at 76-76. And Lonnie Davenport was moving in at 39.

Forks held the ball for the last shot to break the tie as seconds vanished. And then the fluke happened. A Forks pass went astray and Lonnie Davenport smelled it like a wolf smelling out the chicken house. A Forks player had Davenport in his sites, but Davenport had him on his hip, all the long race down the floor.

Strowe could sense it coming. The trailing Forks player would purposely foul Davenport long before he reached the basket, giving him two free throws for the flagrant foul and pray for two misses, like lightning miraculously striking twice.

Davenport didn't have a chance. The Forks player submarined him, cutting the star Zachary guard to the floor. Both players skidded across maple into a heap at the feet of the Zachary band. Both benches emptied. Punches filled the air. Whistles screamed for order. Strowe had four patrolmen at the game for crowd and traffic control. He hoped his men were on the job.

Slowly order was restored nd the players untangled. Lonnie Davenport, surprisingly, was awarded three free throws: two for being fouled in the continuance of a shot and a third as a technical for the flagrant foul.

He made all three with automatic ease, blood streaming from his nose, the announcer said.

Sheriff Strowe felt something go out of him. His record was gone. *They keep pushing you out*, he sighed to himself, though without malice. *They keep pushing you out and farther into history*. What the hell. Records were made to fall and Lonnie Davenport was a good kid, one who never lost his cool and in this situation he could have lost it very easily. He was an all right kid.

Soon the town was alive with horn honking and cheers. Strowe didn't think there would be related trouble over the game's tense ending, but wasn't going to take the chance.

He radioed two of his day-shift deputies and instructed them to head out on a four-hour emergency patrol of town. They had both been listening to the game and didn't need to be informed why.

The emergency passed without serious altercations. There was a strong rivalry, no one needed to be told that. Forks was beef cattle country, and Zachary dairy oriented. A thing could have developed. But it didn't.

At twelve-thirty, Sheriff Strowe tumbled into bed. The lost record ached a little inside him, until his wife woke and kissing him on the cheek said, "Records were made to be broken, Quinn."

And then he was all right with it, felt all right about having it for twenty years, and he dropped off to sleep. He could sleep until eight a.m. now, he was sure.

It wasn't eight a.m. when he woke, however. And it wasn't to the bedroom alarm clock. He woke to an incessantly ringing extension telephone on the nightstand. It was Patrolman Storey.

"What is it, Storey?" he asked.

"It's bad, Quinn, out at Lake Loon. I went down there for a routine check of the picnic grounds. Down Cottage Grove Road from the highway. I found fresh tire tracks leading down to the lake's edge, but no overlap of a car backing away. Lot of footprints. Ground's frozen now. They're perfect frozen casts."

"Where's the car?" Strowe asked.

"My opinion? The bottom of Lake Loon," said Storey, mincing no words.

Lake Loon was the deepest in the state, a crater bed. It had never been sounded to its depth, but fishermen had tried with weighted lines which came up free of sand. Oregon's Crater Lake at over 1,900 feet deep was the nation's deepest. Lake Loon was easily a close second.

By the time Strowe arrived on the scene three other patrol cars had spotlights cast on the lake edge where Patrolman Storey believed a car had gone over and down.

Over and down was the only way a car entered Lake Loon at this spot. No public bathing, only picnics, softball and tennis. About three hundred feet down, the lake was collared with a fifty-foot sloping ledge. From there the black waters ran off into oblivion.

Patrolman Storey had read the auto tracks correctly. A car had drawn itself to the lake's edge. But the perfect, unobliterated tread told them it didn't

back or swing out. And that left straight down.

"Foreign job, or economy compact," said Storey to Ev Strowe. "Footprints only on the passenger side here," he pointed out to Strowe with a flashlight. "Might indicate the driver went down in the car." Storey involuntarily shivered.

"Or that the driver didn't go down in the car, was alone, and pushed it over the edge like off a cliff to rid himself of an economy clunker."

Storey escorted the sheriff around to where the back of a car would have come to rest and re-trained his flashlight. "More footprints. One set. Where he pushed it in from the rear. Then they trail off, back up Cottage Grove Road about two hundred yards until the road becomes grassy. At that point they disappear."

The prints were large. Male footprints, very likely. And something else about them were instantly familiar to Sheriff Strowe. "You played a little basketball for Zachary High, didn't you, Storey?" the sheriff asked.

"Second-string, '61. I got into the game around garbage time."

"Those prints mean anything to you?"

Storey knelt and examined them more closely. He rose nodding. "Athletic shoes; basketball shoes."

"Step into one of them, Storey," Strowe said. "You can't damage it. The ground's frozen like a board."

Patrolman Storey did so, with a little room to spare all around. "I'm a ten. Size-ten basketball sneakers."

"Add a whisper for your street shoes and what would you guess?"

"Size-10½," said Storey. "Couldn't be size-11's and basketball sneakers only come in even and half sizes. Yes, 10½'s."

"In the morning we'll get one of those cherrypickers from Zeldenrust's Machinery Rentals. You've had driver training, haven't you, Storey? You and Phil Groat and Carl Ritzer?"

Storey nodded. "I'll arrange for the cherrypicker," said Sheriff Strowe. "Get on the radio and tell Groat and Ritzer to go home and grab a couple hours sleep and be down here with wetsuits and oxygen tanks at nine in the morning."

Storey turned and cast his glance at the dark lake, where a thin sheet of ice showed a glaze for twenty-feet out. "Think it's hung up on the ledge?"

"If it didn't roll, or land on its nose and topple."

"Hope it's empty," Storey said. It went without saying.

IT WAS A 1964 economy compact and the ledge had held its offering. The body of the dead girl inside, on the floor below the front seat, was the body of Julie Knight. Two large bruises on her right cheek and a third on her forehead made the pretty, almost perfect face now imperfect and puffy.

The car was Julie Knight's, bought for her by her parents less than five months earlier. Not a new car, not an old one. Just something a teenage girl adores and perhaps names Snoopy and knocks around town in with her friends. It was funny—or perhaps not so now that he thought about it—but the only face Sheriff Strowe could see seated next to Julie Knight on the passenger side was the handsome, athletically rugged face of Lonnie Davenport.

The county autopsy surgeon placed the time of death at 1:20 a.m., a full hour before the ground had frozen the killer's footprints from mud to hardened casts.

Death not from drowning, but from blows delivered with a blunt object on Julie Knight's face and forehead.

Sheriff Strowe allowed the funeral to take place and a week's gossip to pass and then he began asking questions.

He asked his most important

questions of Lonnie Davenport, who had been seen by scores of classmates and townspeople after the Forks basketball game, in the company of Julie Knight.

"I met her in the student parking lot next to the gym after the game, Sheriff Strowe," Davenport told the sheriff at his home on a subsequent weekday after school. "I mean, she always met me after the games. Football, basketball, baseball."

"Whose car did you leave in?" Strowe wanted to know.

"Her little economy job. The Atomic Clock, she called it. Atomic clocks use vibrations to run. It was the most vibrating clunker on the face of the earth. I left my car parked in the lot, like I always do when we hit the main drag to celebrate a victory."

"Where did you and Julie go on the night of the Forks game?"

"Let me see—" the boy hesitated.

"We already have statements from witnesses," said Sheriff Strowe, indicating it might be wise of Lonnie to display honest, total recall.

"Well, we stopped in at the Burgerama. Two dozen kids must have seen us there plus the waitress, Mink Elingson. She's a Zachary High junior."

"What time did you leave the Burgerama?"

"Around eleven o'clock. After that we dropped into the Tiger Den on South Commercial, four blocks from the school. It's a jock hang-out. We left there about twelve, maybe a little before. Julia drove me back to the student lot near the gym. Add about a half-hour for getting-to-know-you time, Tactility Sessions, we call them. Touch. About 12:15 a.m., we said goodnight. I drove home in my car and Julie left in hers. That's the last I saw of her."

"You didn't drive in her car down to the picnic grounds on Lake Loon," Sheriff Strowe wanted made clear.

"Cold as it was that night? No way. I remember that distinctly. It was the first freeze of the new year. We had all we could do to keep from freezing that half hour we were parked in the school lot. Her heater is a real turkey." He dropped his head then, suddenly: "Was."

"I'm curious to know why you didn't sit in your car for that Tactility Session?" Sheriff Strowe rushed on, to get them past the word *Was*. "You've got a '70-model fastback, haven't you?"

"A fastback with a broken-out wing window. Probably done by some Forks fan right after the game. It wasn't hit and run, either. Somebody stayed long enough to heist my ath-

letic grip from the back seat."

"With your basketball shoes inside, I suppose."

"I had to borrow a pair for a pick-up game at the field house that next afternoon, on Saturday. Stretch Ulrich's Size 11½'s. I've still got the blisters."

"No one saw you leave the parking lot in your own car?"

"No one but Julie. The lot was deserted. There were a few cars parked around. But no students in them, or around them. And if you want me to establish what time I got home, you'll have to take my word for that, too. I've got a room in the basement of my folk's home, rear entrance. Private. No one heard or saw me come in at that hour."

"But they—your parents—might have heard your car as you pulled up into the driveway."

"Dad's car was parked in the driveway," said Lonnie Davenport, with unblinking eyes. "And he leaves for work on Saturdays before I'm up. I parked out on Cypress Street."

The boy fell silent.

Sheriff Strowe said nothing.

"What about fingerprints on Julie's car?" asked Davenport. "The killer must have left some, or on the weapon."

"The killer wore gloves. It was a cold night. And Julie's killer took the murder weapon with him."

"So where does that leave everybody?" Lonnie Davenport said.

"It leaves Julie Knight dead. And it leaves you as a paramount suspect."

"I didn't kill Julie Knight."

"I'd like more than anything to believe you, Lonnie."

"SORRY TO drop you back where you started, Ev, but I don't buy Lonnie Davenport as a killer." Carl Dunlap, editor of *The Zachary Herald-Talisman*, had dropped by Strowe's office on the pretext of a cup of coffee that was four hours old and strong enough to walk on its own two feet over to the *Herald-Talisman* if Dunlap really wanted some.

Strowe knew it wasn't coffee Carl Dunlap wanted. What he wanted was a bit more serious in nature. What he desired was to go on record to Strowe with his own theory, for whatever it was worth. And a man of the intelligence and instincts of Carl Dunlap was a man whose theories demanded listening to seriously.

"You must have some strong feelings for thinking that way, Carl—or some strong reasons."

"Just one," Dunlap told Sheriff Strowe, pretending a sip of his coffee. "I attended the

Zachary-Forks basketball game that night, Ev. You recall the near brawl at the end? When that Forks forward dropped Lonnie Davenport, and everyone became a participant?"

"What are you driving at, Carl?"

"Precisely this," said Carl Dunlap. "In all that bedlam—the cops, the referees, the ballplayers, the students, the flailing fists, and the flying tackles . . .What was Lonnie Davenport doing? He was keeping cool and he was trying to separate the brawlers and he was trying to keep a bad situation from becoming a bloody free-for-all.

"And I ask myself, as you should seriously ask yourself, Ev, would a boy like that be capable of excessive jealousy, or rage, or hatred, or vindictiveness? Ev, I think you'll get the same answer I'm getting. No, he wouldn't be."

"I have to agree with you, Carl. I suppose it's better to have no suspects at all than the wrong one."

"Well, cheer up, Ev. You may be receiving more assistance in this town than you know."

"How do you mean, Carl?"

"Assistances from voices in the Zachary High *Soundings*."

The *Soundings* had not been around in Ev Strowe's day. It was the high school's small literary magazine, a slender bimonthly publication put out by Zachary High's English and Journalism students and advisored by Matt Hemphill, the head of the English Department. At 25¢ per copy, it was sold all over town, from the Bi-Rite Drugs to the book department of Chaney's Department Store. It sold well. It also mildly surprised Strowe for its quality and adultness.

Carl Dunlap now presented Strowe with the current number of *The Soundings*. He had it folded open to a middle page, a red circle drawn around a four line poem on the lefthand side.

OVER YOUR SHOULDER

It sank like a boulder,
didn't it?
And while the girl died, a
loon cried.
As your conscience
watched you from
behind,
Hidden in the darkened
bush.

Hope Knight, '75

Sheriff Strowe handed the volume back. "Julie Knight's kid sister," he said to Dunlap.

"Stalking a killer's conscience and trying to smoke him out into the open," said Dunlap. "She called me from the high school this morning."

"Don't tell me, let me guess. She wants you to print the poem in the *Herald-Talisman*. On the front page, in a black-bordered box."

"Nothing so melodramatic. But she does want it printed on the editorial page in tomorrow evening's edition."

"What did you tell her?"

"That I'd think about it. I have a hunch there will be more poems, Ev. And if she knows something about her sister's death, and her sister's murderer . . ."

" . . .she's setting herself up to be murdered as well," Ev Strowe finished. "Which means I'd better drop out to the Knight place after school lets out and have a talk with Hope Knight."

The Knight dairy farm was a family operation, though Strowe suspected Paul Knight at times wished he'd fathered two sons instead of two daughters. Two hired hands working three days a week helped to take up the slack, and the daughters and Paul's wife, Betty, took up the rest.

Paul Knight had developed his 200 acres into one of the best dairy spreads in the valley. He had 165 prize Holsteins and his herd annually produced over 30,000 pounds of milk per animal, from a spotless milking parlor of thirty stalls and vacuum-operated milking machines.

Sheriff Strowe found Paul Knight in the milking parlor. He was between milkings, cleaning the aseptic tubes through which the milk ran from the parlor into stainless steel holding tanks at the end of the room. He had lost some weight and his blue eyes were ringed with sleeplessness and the continuing sadness of loss.

He smiled valiantly and gave Strowe a beefy hand. "Cleaning these things twice a day now. Been milking until eight in the evenings. I feel a little guilty about driving Betty and Hope and the part-time hands so hard. But then we've been hit with hard times."

"I'd like to talk with Hope, Paul."

"Up in her room changing. She got home from school about ten minutes ago." He looked at Strowe significantly. "Your timing is too perfect not to want to see her for good reasons, Ev."

Ev Strowe nodded and showed him the four-line poem in the Zachary High *Soundings*. Paul Knight read it carefully.

"Hope write this?"

"With a hinted promise to Carl Dunlap at the *Herald-Talisman* of more. She wants them published in the paper. I think she knows or suspects

who killed Julie. And now she's battering at the killer's conscience through poetry."

"She could make him tip his hand," said Paul Knight.

"And she could follow her sister to an early grave," Sheriff Strowe warned.

Paul Knight's eyes reflected the same fearful possibility. "You better get on up to the house, Ev," he said sternly.

If all of nature's positive aspects of a young girl's life had been bestowed upon Julie Knight, the imbalance reflected itself in her younger sister. There was no ignoring her excessive height, the bigbonedness, the eyes set too widely apart, which gave her face a sense of open space and a certain nonidentification.

A sophomore, she worked on the staffs of the school newspaper, yearbook and the *Soundings*. She'd struck her separate peace early. If, to many Zachary girls, to be a song leader or cheerleader was to realize the dreams of girlhood, then the dreams of Hope Knight had been dashed as completely as the face of a small pocket mirror dropped from fifty building stories onto concrete pavement.

As Ev Strowe headed for the house, he spotted Hope Knight emerge from the kitchen on the house's north side. She wore blue jeans and a heavy plaid shirt and watching her loping, irregular strides, Strowe's mind caught a flash of not a young girl coming from the house, but a young man.

"Sheriff Strowe! You come to help me and Dad milk those two parlors of cows tonight? We could sure use two extra hands to help scrub udders and teats. My fingers are so stiff I can't even make them snap."

"I came to talk to you about your poetry," Sheriff Strowe said as they walked for the milking parlor. "Your new poetry."

"Oh, you mean *Over Your Shoulder*. The one two weeks from now will make that one as tame as Mother Goose. It's called *Soundings From the Grave*. Ten sticks of pure dynamite."

Sheriff Strowe halted her. He took her by the shoulders and stared into the spaced eyes, once again being struck with an illusion of maleness. "Hope, this poetry could get you killed. In fact, the instant any definite clues or hint of the identity of the killer show up in print in *Soundings*, he's liable to come after you."

Hope Knight twisted a smile and shrugged out of Sheriff Strowe's grasp. "You don't believe in poetic justice, Sheriff Strowe? Well, your system isn't

working any better. It's been almost two weeks now, you know."

"We're doing everything we can, Hope."

"But it's a pretty sad situation, you must admit. You have no clues, no witnesses, no fingerprints, no murder weapon. And if it hadn't been for that crater ledge of slag and rotted timber at Lake Loon, you wouldn't even have a car or a corpse. I'm going to expose Julie's murderer, put my poetry and myself on a collision course with him. I'm going to do it. Now, if there isn't anything else, I have to clean two holding tanks before the six o'clock milking."

"There is one other thing, Hope. For your own safety, I'm recommending to Carl Dunlap at the *Herald-Talisman* that he not print any of your poetry. And I intend to make the same recommendation to Matt Hemphill, your advisor."

"You do that, Sheriff Strowe," came the deadly voice, "and I'll run you through so many courtrooms you'll begin to feel like re-processed sausage no one can make come out right. And in case you think I'm sellin' wolf tickets, Sheriff, let me remind you that I'm very well-versed on this state's laws on libel and censorship. My holding tanks aren't cleaning themselves, Sheriff Strowe. Please excuse my rudeness, but Dad has a funny idea about an hour's work for an hour's pay."

HOPE KNIGHT'S first poem left all of Zachary aghast and edgy. By morning, not a single one of the 3,000 copies could be found for sale anywhere. Leaving Sheriff Strowe to wonder whether Julie Knight's killer had his.

"The town isn't going to sit still two weeks for the next issue of *Soundings*," Carl Dunlap told Strowe over the phone that same day, "so I'm running *Soundings From the Grave* on the editorial page of tomorrow evening's *Herald-Talisman*, with a press run of 10,000. And those will be whisked out of our hands before the ink is dry. I can't help it, Ev. The town wants it, and I serve the town. You don't bite the hand that feeds you—or kill the goose that lays the golden eggs."

But there would be killing, Strowe felt. He wasn't sure he and his men could prevent it.

The following evening, as promised by Carl Dunlap, Hope Knight's second poem, *Soundings From the Grave*, appeared on the editorial page of the *Herald-Talisman*.

He ran it without any commentary of his own, leaving his readers as sole judges.

SOUNDINGS FROM
THE GRAVE
by
Hope Knight

Having total impunity now
from my words,
Knowing no second death
can harm me,
I speak up from the grave,
My soil-smeared words
seeking the ear of my mur-
derer.
Could you have hated me
so fiercely
That the sisterhood and
brotherhood of man
Meant less to you than the
crush of guilt?
Like a watch overwound
by absent-mindedness,
Can your life be anything
like normal now?
Is sleep easy? Does food
hold taste?
Does water have property
in your throat?
Do you stand in heat and
wind and wet,
As impervious as marble to
their touch?
I guess you do. And I
further guess you are still
yourself
Marbelized about what to
do
With the tennis shoes.

"Yeah, it's stout stuff all right," agreed Lonnie Davenport over a coke with Sheriff Strowe in the Tigers' Den the next afternoon. "I'd put old Hope's pen up against any sword in the land, any day of the week."

"I particularly like the reminder to the killer about those basketball shoes," Sheriff Strowe said to Davenport. "I'm curious. Did yours ever turn up?"

"A smart apple like that isn't suddenly going to turn unclever and return the shoes to my car, especially when it is also generally agreed I didn't kill Julie. He'll pin Julie's murder on somebody else who's a size 10½, not me."

It was puzzling about the basketball shoes. Of what importance could they possibly have been in this act of brutal murder?

On the next Friday the third poem appeared in the *Herald-Talisman*. It was chronologically titled:

SECOND SOUNDINGS
FROM THE GRAVE
by
Hope Knight

Up through dark, dank soil
rise my words.
When I was alive and leapt
on maple,
My lungs burst with "We
don't mess around,
Hey! We don't mess

around! Zachary High just

Goes to town on anybody
that's around!"
But it wasn't to town I
went that morning;
It was to the dead and
quiet lake.
He had called, your lying
lips spoke.
Already he was flying to
the cold shore
Of the black, tideless lake,
holding back his love
Like fists against a pressing
foe.
Do you know how fast I
drove?
Do I know how fast you
ran?
We both know how long I
waited.
And how long murder
took you.
And how long I lived after
that.
These things we both
know, my murderer.

"Very rambling and disconnected," said Carl Dunlap to Ev Strowe, "a kind of free association babbled under some sort of influence or trance. Two quarters of college psychology is doing the talking now, Ev. I want you to understand that. But the poetry is strange, very strange."

"You can't be seriously thinking of printing any more

of it, then. Hope Knight is shooting in the dark now and her sister's killer knows it."

Hope Knight's poetry was still selling papers for Dunlap, but Strowe knew when a dying horse was being whipped. And Carl Dunlap had more honest journalist in his blood than tabloid pitchman.

"I'll consider them on merit alone from here on out," he told Sheriff Strowe. "The *Soundings* is due out again tomorrow. Perhaps Hope is building up courage to present some real clues in print. And perhaps tomorrow is the day."

If there were clues in the short, six-line poem, they were exposed as bluntly as the force which had killed Julie Knight from first to last line.

THIRD SOUNDINGS
FROM THE GRAVE
by
Hope Knight

We both know, my murderer, whose hand wielded the pipe;
As we both know whose hands pushed me to my grave of water;
And like a dead voice speaking of the deadly existance
Of Spoon River smallness, a dead Zachary voice now speaks;
To point my voice at my murderer;
To aim my dead indignant rage at you, Lon Davenport.

Strowe didn't believe a word of it. Without proof, Hope Knight's accusation amounted to nothing. Only Sheriff Strowe seemed to sense other clues.

The next afternoon, while Hope Knight was in class, he made another trip out to the Knight farm.

"You can't really expect to learn anything of Julie's murder in Hope's room," said her incredulous father, as he left off studying a catalog listing the best bulls for sale in the county. "If Hope found out her room has been invaded without her permission . . ."

"You know it wouldn't take me an hour to get a warrant," Strowe told Paul Knight.

"Hope will be home in an hour," Knight warned him.

"I'll be finished and gone long before that, Paul."

Paul Knight closed the catalog and pushed back from his desk. "I'll take you upstairs," he said.

To confirm the portraits of opposites Sheriff Strowe already had in his mind, he asked Paul Knight to first show him Julie's room. Since her death, nothing in it had been changed

or moved, Paul Knight told him.

Julie's room was dominated by the lively orange and black of Zachary High. Pom-poms, wall pennants, snapshots, pep tags, dance programs. It was a room oddly still alive with her and Strowe couldn't keep himself from the eerie sensation that at any moment, Julie Knight would come bounding in the door, put a Three Dog Night record on her phonograph, and then flop down on her bed to do homework or to make her daily brace of after-school telephone calls.

There was really no describing the opposite effect Hope Knight's room had on him.

So gray and unremarkable was it, Strowe might as well have been standing in the middle of a rented room in a two-floor hotel. Except for books, five shelves of them, Hope Knight had no special love of objects and artifacts. On a bare, pink wall above her bed hung a bulletin board and on another wall, a calendar.

It was in the neatly organized closet of clothes and shoes that Sheriff Strowe found the shoebox of letters. And contrary to anything he would have suspected, several of them appeared to have been written to Hope Knight from Lonnie Davenport. Their color was decidedly purple and the sexual language as explicit as the dialogue in a blue movie. The handwriting was bold, sprawlish and definitely male compared to the slanting, delicate hand of Hope Knight found by Strowe in class themes and test papers done by Hope in a previous school year.

The letters seemed genuine, all right. And yet it seemed highly unlikely that Lonnie Davenport should even know Hope Knight that well. The difference between senior and sophomore was vast, as were their special differences in Lonnie's sports activity and Hope's literary passivity. And further, it seemed improbable that an affair of this kind in a town as small and circumspect as Zachary would totally escape the eyes of everyone. Sheriff Strowe wished then that he had a sample of Lonnie Davenport's handwriting.

He glanced again at the cork bulletin board, identical to the one in Julie Knight's room, except for its sad lack of personal mementoes. A few small snapshots of the Zachary High newspaper and annual staffs. Two of what appeared to be the assembled members of the drama club, one staged against the backdrop of a rustic cabin, the other a street scene.

Across the top of the first

photo were scribbled the words, "Drama Club production *Huckleberry Finn*, Fall 1972. Hope Knight as most two-faced, used-car-dealing Duke as ever trod the boards." The second photograph's caption read, "Spring Drama Club production of *Othello*. Hope Knight plays First Senator. 'Adieu, brave Moor. Use Desdemona well'. She overcomes this and other innocuous lines with strikingly dignified senatorial stage presence."

The photographs only temporarily deflected the Sheriff's main preoccupation: a sample of Lonnie Davenport's handwriting. He knew where that sample might be found.

LEAVING Hope Knight's room, he returned to Julie's and attacked the contents of the drawers of her writing desk. In a lower right-hand compartment he found a bundle of personal letters, bound with blue yarn; letters, notes and holiday cards from Lonnie Davenport. The manner in which they had been signed by Lonnie Davenport was unvaried and so he selected one randomly for handwriting and took it with him back to Hope's room.

Even a cursory inspection revealed Hope's letters to be forgeries, all of them, signed 'Lon', a nickname he apparently used only in Hope Knight's fantasies.

Replacing the box of letters in the darkened corner of Hope Knight's closet, a large cardboard box now made its shadowy presence known. Strowe stretched into the closet's far recesses, hooked a finger onto a corner of it and pulled it out into the light.

It contained old clothing. Not the discarded skirts and sweaters and out-of-style blouses a whimish teenaged girl usually discarded.

The box held male clothing: two button-down dress shirts, some neckties, a pair of flare jeans and two pair of double-knit slacks, even jockey-briefs and T-shirts. Rummaging deeper, Strowe's fingers struck wool with a familiar feel. And two bulky objects, the canvas quality of which also felt familiar.

He knew their identity even before he resurrected them into better light. The objects were Lonnie Davenport's basketball warm-up sweat shirt and warm-up pants and his size-10½ basketball shoes.

Explaining to Paul Knight about a sensitive, confused daughter's transvestism was, for Sheriff Strowe, a hairsbreadth easier than telling him she was a murderess.

More strictly, Strowe felt

sure a psychiatrist would find not a murder*ess* but a murder*er*. Hope Knight's dream of ever having Lonnie Davenport as her genuine lover had already slipped beyond reach. But the next best thing was well within her reach; she could, by wearing street clothing stolen from Lonnie Davenport in the privacy of her own room, capture some vague sense of his closeness.

Had she not been the Duke in the Drama Club's production of *Huckleberry Finn*?

And a very stately, very masculine Venetian senator in their *Othello*?

For Hope Knight, it was a natural act and inclination to slip into another person's skin by slipping into his clothing. To wear his clothes, to feel them touching her body, transported her completely.

The thought of murder had risen in her brain, Strowe thought. Playing the role of Lonnie and then alternately playing herself as his lover was more frustrating than fulfilling. Hatred took the place of love. But which one to injure? Not Lonnie Davenport, certainly. She loved him. Then toward whom should her rage be directed?

Toward her sister, of course. She already knew she had the imbalanced ability to become Lonnie Davenport anytime she wished. It was simply another plane of play-acting.

"Good Lord," said Paul Knight, startling Strowe out of his revery. "What's all that?"

"Lonnie Davenport's clothing," Sheriff Strowe replied simply. "And I think you know what it means. Hope must have lured Julie to the lake and then . . ." The unfinished image was clear to both men.

With her height and gangliness, Hope Knight would even have resembled Lonnie Davenport a little when she came down Cottage Grove Road where Julie's car was parked, with Julie waiting impatiently behind the wheel or standing somewhere nearby.

The darkness, the lateness of the hour, her anticipation to see her boy friend; all these factors would have temporarily clouded Julie's perception of things until it was too late to defend herself or shake her younger sister from her terrible trance.

"But her poetry," said a visibly shaken Paul Knight. "And the *Herald-Talisman*. Wasn't she making every honest attempt to expose Julie's murderer?"

"Of course," said Strowe. "To eventually expose herself. Poem by poem, she was slowly pulling herself back into the horrible reality of it all. It would have taken time for her

to move from the voice of her sister speaking from her grave, to the voice of Lonnie Davenport, and finally to herself. But a total transformation would have come to pass."

Paul Knight sighed with incredible sadness.

Out beyond the living room window, past green rolling lawns, a yellow and black school bus pulled to a halt at the Knight front gate. A young girl stepped from it and began the long walk up to the house.

"I hope the matter is resolved long before any public trial," said Sheriff Strowe. "And I'm sure it will be. No one wants Hope to endure any more embarrassment and pain. Her young life has been a stifling nightmare of it. She deserves a long rest from it."

And then Hope Knight was standing in the open doorway, smiling valiantly, if a little in terror at noticing Sheriff Strowe's unexpected presence. "How many milkings this afternoon, Dad? The thirty in the east pasture? Hey! do I smell apple pie and fresh cheese?"

"The milking can wait for later, Hope," said Paul Knight's breaking voice as he tried to find his daughter's wide-set eyes, already glistening with moisture. "Sheriff Strowe wants to have a little talk with you. About the contents of the box there on the sofa, and other matters."

Hope Knight dropped to her knees then. Her sobbing brought her mother out from the kitchen. "God, it's like standing in a room and watching yourself being painted into a corner," said Hope. "Backing up, backing up and waiting for your shoes to get painted. You can hardly stand the waiting. But you know it's going to come. All over your very best new pair of shoes."

"How about talking in the kitchen, Hope?" her father suggested. "Over warm apple pie and cheese?"

But Hope Knight had already turned and raced out of the front door.

Ev Strowe let her go. When he went out into the massive Knight front yard, she was a distant figure sitting cross-legged with her back turned to the house in symbolic shame.

Hope Knight had not gone anywhere, Sheriff Strowe thought. She had taken her first small step back from somewhere.

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month

Black Lace Gambit

She was all female and black lace and she knew her value to the last tainted dollar. And so did I...

by LAWRENCE TREAT

THE SIGN on the outer door, Room 705, read *Mel Carver, Investigator.* The office inside was small, but it was partitioned off into an entry with a desk, and the private office beyond. Even in the best of times nobody had ever sat at the desk. Still, it had looked good.

But no more. If you walked in, you could somehow tell that these were hard times. There was no correspondence in sight, the daily calendar was a couple

of days behind, and the desk chair was tight up against the desk, as if it had never been used and wasn't going to be. Still, Carver hadn't quite given up, and wouldn't until the end of the month, when his next rent payment was due.

He'd read the paper all the way through, including the ads, and he was wondering whether to use the phone for a little gossiping or whether to save himself the few cents, when he heard the outer door open.

He could tell from the step that this was a woman, and he perked up at once. In his mind's eye he envisioned a beautiful blond with a ten grand retainer in her bag and a fantastic story to tell. He was, at bottom, that romantic.

He waited a moment or two, and then he opened the door and saw her. She was blond all right and she was beautiful, but she certainly had no ten grand.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

She blinked, and her mouth dropped in disappointment, but after a moment or two she managed a smile. It was pleading and vaguely hopeful, and he smiled back.

"Glad you dropped in, Marcia" he said.

"I just thought I'd say hello. How are things?"

He shook his head. "No dice. Nothing doing. It's over."

"I know," she said. "That law."

"Progress!" he said, snorting. "Adultery's accepted. Nothing wrong with it any more. Sleep with your wife, sleep with her best friend, sleep with a tramp or anybody you want to, it's like having lunch together."

"Don't be so bitter," she said softly. "People still—"

"Sure," he said, interrupting, "but the point is that now you can get a divorce on grounds of desertion or mental cruelty. That's all you need. People don't divorce for adultery any more, even when it's for real."

"Did you have many cases that were for real?"

He shrugged and opened the door to his inner office. Marcia slipped inside and sat down as if she'd just reached her favorite chair. He followed her before answering her question.

"Hardly," he said. "The way we'd set it up, with me coming in on the two of you with a camera and a witness, that was about it. You figured in practically every case I handled."

"Well, it was good while it lasted."

"It was a living. You know, I always wanted to ask you, did any of them try to make love?"

"They were usually too scared, too nervous. They hardly looked at me."

"I don't know how they could help it. There you were all undressed, and they didn't even look?"

"I was never all undressed."

"Sure, but with that black lace bra of yours and matching panties. I keep thinking about it, and I always felt—" He cut himself off. "Clients are human," he went on. "Some of them must have made passes at you, didn't they?"

"Some? Naturally," she said, blushing, "but you always saved me by knocking on the door at the right time. As if you had some kind of special intuition."

"We understood each other," he said. "We were a good team and it's too bad to break up. Just because they had to go and make a law—" Carver grunted. "But that's over and done."

"I guess so. What are you going to do now?"

"Be a cop. I took the exam last week and I think I did pretty well. Besides, I have the right kind of experience and all the other qualifications, and they need police."

"People like you don't apply every day, that's for sure. What does it pay?"

"I'll start at eight and go up. A detective, first grade, can get as high as fourteen or fifteen."

Her eyes brightened and she spoke confidently.

"You will," she said. "I know you will."

"Nothing's sure," he said. "Think of what we had, and now where are we? *Kaput!*"

"Don't be so pessimistic," Marcia said. "There can be wonderful things ahead. New jobs, new chances, maybe a whole new life."

"You always did make me feel good," he said. "I'd get to thinking what a messy business this was, and then you'd come along and say I was bringing happiness and a second chance to people. But—oh, well. You were telling me about the ones that wanted to go through with

it. How did you handle them?"

"I'd stall. They'd claim they were paying plenty and they ought to get a dividend. I'd point out that that wasn't in the agreement, and then you'd come in. You always saved me. I could rely on you."

"But didn't they try to date you afterwards?"

"I never mix business with pleasure," she said.

"I know, and I guess I'm business."

"You *were* business."

"The good old times," he said, sighing. "I don't suppose you dropped in in the hope of getting more work, did you?"

"Oh, no. I just wanted to see you and reminisce."

"You mean check back on some of our clients, and get money out of them?"

"No, no! Although it would be easy, wouldn't it?"

"All the things we know, between the two of us! All the secrets and confidences. Clients telling the real reasons why they wanted their divorces. They had something on their wives, or their wives on them. Criminal acts. Embezzlement, larceny. Unnatural sex practises. Somehow they had a compulsion to talk."

"Did you keep files?"

"Sure, but in code."

"Are you glad they passed the law? Do you believe in it?"

"I believe that the right people should get together, and that when you make a mistake you should admit it."

She let out a nervous peal of laughter, then broke it off. "Please, I didn't mean to make fun of you."

"You could never try to hurt me," he said. "Not you."

She gazed at him with a fixed, sorrowing expression. "Well," she said finally, getting up. "I just wanted to drop in. I guess I won't see you again, will I?"

When he didn't answer, she repeated her words.

"Will I?" she said.

He frowned and he seemed to be searching his mind for something important that eluded him. Then abruptly his face brightened up.

"Marcia," he said, grasping her by the shoulders and staring down intently. "Are you married?"

"Of course. And you?"

"No, not yet. But—"

He relaxed and they both smiled, very slowly and at the same time. Although neither of them spoke, the old habit of understanding each other told them they both had the same thought. One more divorce job, but strictly personal, and they could do it in the old-fashioned way.

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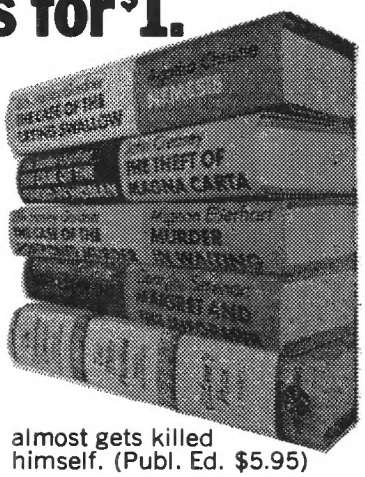

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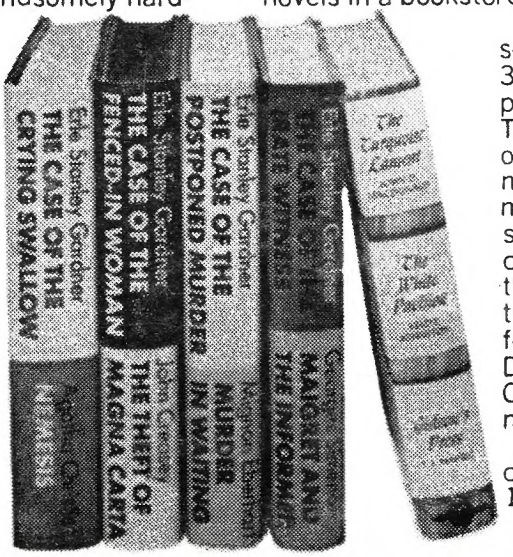

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